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Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

EQUIPPING LEADERSHIP FOR CULTURAL RENEWAL:
A DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITIES OF MISSION

Written by

ANDREW CORNETT

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kurt Fredrickson", written over a horizontal line.

Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: March 31, 2020

EQUIPPING LEADERSHIP FOR CULTURAL RENEWAL:
A DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITIES OF MISSION

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

ANDREW CORNETT
MARCH 2020

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ABSTRACT

Equipping Leadership for Cultural Renewal: A Discipleship Strategy for Communities of Mission

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Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2020

This project aimed to design and implement a discipleship strategy of short-term training and longer-term communities of mission for cultural renewal among the students and parents of Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church. The goal was to equip and empower them to be the faithful presence of Jesus' love in the various cultural spheres of their ordinary lives. This study begins by examining the unique context of Signal Pres through its geographic and demographic location, cultural situation, and leadership challenges. That context presents the church with a unique opportunity to recover its mission and revise its methods.

The core reflections of the project work through culture, Scripture, and theology to draw four conclusions. First, it argues for retelling the full biblical story of salvation for creation and culture. Second, it recovers the church's ancient-future position of "voluntary exile" and its posture of "faithful presence" within the world. Third, it examines the need for renewing habits to shape gestures of worship and mission. Fourth, it recommends revising church structures for training and sending to serve in the world.

The ministry project itself was led and implemented by a Core Team from Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church in Signal Mountain, TN, from summer 2017 to summer 2018. They had the challenge of creating and designing a course of discipleship that practiced those conclusions. The test was whether the course of discipleship training would equip participants to scatter and form smaller communities of mission for faithful presence in a particular domain. Though participants completed the course, they did not then serve together and grow into a community of mission. While significant adaptation is necessary before further attempts, there is great curiosity in and potential for this church in pursuing ministries of cultural renewal.

Content Reader: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD

Words: 288

DEDICATION

To my children, Michael, Caroline, and Elanor:

May you flourish with joy in being wise stewards of the gifts God has given you,
cultivating them for the preservation and development of his world, the good of your
neighbors, and the end of his glory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks to go my wife Robin for her constant encouragement and unflagging support of both me and seeing this project through. Her own creative work and faithful presence to tasks and people in her world has been an inspiration to me in mine.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the staff, elders, members, and wider community of Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church for being my co-laborers in the work of the gospel in our area. The entirety of this program and the specifics of this project have been carried on in their midst on top of the normal life of serving as a pastor. Without their friendship, kindness, understanding, permission, partnership, and prayers, I could not conceive of how it would have come to pass.

I would also like to thank the Camp House in Chattanooga and in particular its director, Matt Busby, for hosting a short conference in the summer of 2014. It was there that I heard both Andy Crouch and James K. A. Smith speak in a way that sparked my imagination toward working on this kind of political discipleship for everyday life in the world.

A set of further thanks go to the students and families among whom I have worked for twenty-two years, for showing me both the beautiful “many-ness” of the gifts God gracefully gives for the creative flourishing of this world and also the terrible restlessness that comes to hearts, bodies, and lives when they do not rest in God himself.

With respect to all the class work, thank you to John Spencer for his great support, interest, and prayer. In the writing of this project, I offer my sincere thanks to Joey Sherrard and Carter Newbold for their frequent encouragement, conversation, and willingness to critically read sample sections along the way. Liz Edrington’s reading skill assisted me with the final edits.

On a lighter note, thank you to the staff of both Mayfly Coffee on Signal Mountain, TN and Milk and Honey in Chattanooga, TN for the provision of a third space in which to read, study, write, listen, learn, and meet so many members of our community. Thank you to Bri, Anna, Ashley, Sarah(s), Jimmy, Matt, and Sylvia for your many kindnesses. May your cultural labors increase in fruitfulness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PART ONE: MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER 1: THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SIGNAL MOUNTAIN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH	13

PART TWO: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	35
CHAPTER 3: RETELLING THE STORY AND RECOVERING A CALLING	76
CHAPTER 4: RENEWING THE HABITS AND REVISIONING THE STRUCTURES	115

PART THREE: MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER 5: DISCIPLESHIP FOR PRACTICE: MINISTRY STRATEGY AND GOALS	142
CHAPTER 6: FORWARD: IMPLEMENTATION, ASSESSMENT, AND EVALUATION	153
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	164
BIBLIOGRAPHY	171

PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

One of the privileges of living on Signal Mountain is the easy access to a network of trails that trace out the contours of the local mountains, forested ridges, hollers, and rocky outcrops. Over years of running these trails, I have learned the map of separate streams that spill from the plateaus, following various ruts and runnels downhill, combing and separating and gathering again only to end in the wide Tennessee River.

Occasionally, sudden showers or periods of steady rainfall make the network so much more obvious in an overflow of unwelcome waterfalls on highways or flooded roads.

Five years with my head down in pastoral ministry practice here has kept me attentive to the relational ground as much as running has kept my eyes on the trail and footing. I have started to notice features of the local “ministry landscape” as I was more and more engaged in the world of student, family, and pastoral ministry in this community and region. That came at a moment when our local church (Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church, hereafter “Signal Pres”) was beginning a significant transition and asking hard questions of vision, direction, and programming. Those questions have led to competing and shifting priorities with changes that felt like sudden, unwelcome waterfalls to many. Each of the following situations have been seemingly minor features or challenges that began to flow into one wide river of ministry opportunity.

First, there is now a new urgency on the availability and value of time to on people’s schedules. While my first fifteen years of ministry experience in the local church focused on teenagers and I developed some knowledge of the family and desire to partner with parents, the last five years have brought a more explicit pastoral role that took seriously the rhythms and approaches to working with the whole family. My observation

of much less available time and margin in students' lives began to be magnified at the level of parents and entire families. Practices, games, tutoring, field trips, enrichments, tournaments, and more seemed to proliferate and produce a magic access card that unlocked hours and hours of precious time on the family schedule. The verdict may unclear on the reason why: whether it is driven by a by a success- and achievement-oriented educational culture, a "helicopter" mode of anxious parenting, or the industrialization of traditionally extra-curricular activities into near-professional performance. But the result was clear: the quantity (and quality) of time available on the margin was vanishingly slim.

Second, pastors and church leaders face a growing question on what to prioritize in ministry. Within the student ministry at Signal Pres (which I lead and help develop the staff), we were both bringing to an end one form of a student leadership team and struggling to make any progress on sending students to serve in the name of Jesus in traditional ministries of mercy or justice in the community. Students expressed both a lack of time on their schedule time and a confusion over why this was essential or important to do, especially when they were already doing some form of service in the community through their school or team. We as student ministry leaders realized that they were missing some key gospel realities in the process, and our failure to connect students to lives of mercy and justice via "service" imperiled our work in connecting them to the Lord and to one another as well.¹

¹ Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 291-292.

At the same time, a third feature stood alongside the second: an escalating number of our ordinary middle and high school students are engaged in multiple forms of cultural life outside their already-demanding educational commitments. Many of them take this work deeply seriously and invest great quantities of time, energy, relationships, and even finances to that end. That involvement creates additional patterns for families as parents follow the choices and passions of their children and students. Families' efforts tend to concentrate over time in the domains of athletics, academics, or the arts as webs of relationships thicken and histories of involvement deepen. These become part of the cultural fabric and institutions in our community.

These three streams merged with a fourth channel of conversation surrounding a perceived competition between church and community. Our church was coming off a twenty-year period of consistent efforts at attractional ministry that privileged the place of the church building as the meeting point of people's needs and programmatic efforts. There was a sense in conversation that too much busy-ness and engagement with the wider world was inhibiting people's time and attention on existing ministry efforts. Some staff, leaders, and members began to sense that the church's sphere was slipping to the level of one more cultural option among a crowded field of competitors. Phrases like "we lose more people every spring to the ballfields" or "they're too busy with book club" were on lips. Laments about the "drop-off culture" (among parents who bring kids for ministry at the church but demonstrate little desire to come themselves) became commonplace, coupled with comments around how the culture and families "up here" are "not the way they used to be."

Finally, while Signal Pres had long been a stalwart witness for the essentials of evangelical faith in Jesus Christ and the changed life that accompanies it, we as leaders began to feel somewhat less comfortable with our ability to connect that faith and its story to the contours of everyday life. We were suspicious that our small group environments were not hitting the mark of tackling matters of real concern and that our public teaching, while deeply biblical, felt more connected to the insider rather than interpreting life for the outsider. Generational pressures from either end of the age spectrum helped widen the divide between more established forms of ministry and newer and expressions of ministry that more closely spoke to daily or weekly realities.

While a surface reflection might consider these as individual streams to cross, they combined and ultimately flowed together into the same reality. My own time educational interests and background cultural learning were trending in the direction of a growing discovery of the wider history of Reformed theology when it came to a theology of culture, the relationship of church and culture, and leadership in ministry practice. To me as one who did a lot of wandering within evangelicalism, those discoveries alone were like stumbling upon a map to a backcountry paradise. I had a renewed desire to see our church be about leadership in mission and learn again to articulate why it exists along with the how and what that yield the shape of a mission-driven ministry expression in our local context.

These five “streams” all met up and flowed into the wider river that presented an urgent challenge for rethinking and redoubling a practice of discipleship driven by mission and attentive to the wider world of culture. That discipleship would include the big story of Scripture, recovering the practices of formation for the promised new

creation, and reviving the church in witness and mission within the world rather than settling for ministry maintained onsite. Put simply, our ministry challenge was this: how do we do gospel-driven discipleship in our time that equips students and parents, women and men to make sense *of* their world *to* their world and to take up their lives in that world as witnesses to Christ the King for the flourishing of all? This ministry project will design and implement a discipleship strategy of short-term training and longer-term communities of mission for cultural renewal among the students and parents of Signal Pres in order to equip and empower them as the faithful presence of Jesus' love in the various spheres of ordinary life.

Ministry Project Shape

There is one key definition and three precise elements to this project. *Culture* is notoriously thorny to define, but it refers most generally in these pages to the whole web of human relationships, activity, work, and all that is created by and flows from them, material or immaterial.² “Cultural renewal” is the term given here to the wide work of Christians participating as new-creation people in the midst of the old-creation's work of culture: creating, conserving, caring, developing, and stewarding the various spheres of created life. It looks back toward creation and God's command to humanity (Gn 1:26-30, 2:15-17), presses through the curse of the fall and the thorns and thistles that accompany

² This is a broad view, mostly adapted from James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, (New York: Oxford, 2010), 39-40. For more specifics at the level of how a congregation is a local culture, see J. R. Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012). For how the congregation interacts with its surrounding local culture, see Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Initiatives*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

all life and work (Gn 3), is taken up and straightened out in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, is now offered as an act of loving God, and neighbor, and of worship itself (Col 3:23-24), and creatively anticipates the future coming of Jesus as Lord—who makes “all things new”—to reign with his people in the New Jerusalem amid the new heavens and earth (Rv 21-22).³ The first element is that this story must be recovered, received, and re-told told as the true story of the world, one that both confronts alternative stories of this world (as God’s revelation) yet affirms by common grace its deep structures and desires however distorted their direction might have become. Believers in Jesus Christ occupy a unique place in this world as the church in exile, and the second element to be considered is the biblical posture that goes along with that position: faithful presence. The church learns to practice such a presence through a handful of gestures that live out God’s story of redemption in their own time and place.

Third, there are practices to take up. Cultural work is never value-free, and it comes to us already as a “second-nature” level of habits and practices that carry a way of seeing and being in the world and form us for better or for worse.⁴ Culture is always in play at all levels of living and always subject to both distortion by sin and death and redirection by the gospel of grace. The interplay of stories, habits, and practices is deeply important, so recognizing and submitting to new practices that fit a new story is required

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible.

⁴ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 34.

to be formed for cultural renewal. Recovering ways and habits of seeing and of living help shape us believers to live as the “faithful presence” of Jesus’ love in ordinary life.⁵

Fourth, there are structures of lay ministry to develop with humility—some to be removed, some to be renewed, some to be created. The organized local church in its institutional form can be like any other organization or entity in that it resists change, stonewalls facing competing priorities, loves the quick fix, is tempted to consolidate power and leadership, and confuses its servant role by meeting needs of insiders more than living the mission toward outsiders.⁶ One of the most bedeviling problems facing the church is recovering its mission is to continue its on-going conversion by Christ (renewing by the gospel) and a conversion of its forms (renewing of its structures). The biblical vision of the laity (the whole of God’s people, *laos*) is one called in Jesus Christ, remade in his image, equipped by his Spirit, and commissioned for sharing in his ministry.⁷ Despite room for adapting organizational forms, much church life often slips into one of two approaches from a Christendom orientation: either a sharp clergy/laity divide of giver/receiver, minister/ministered to or a split between a relative minority “getting in the game” (ministering in the church in normal ecclesial forms of lay ministry) while a majority of members remain on the bench. Both relatively ignore the ministry or mission outside the church community and leave it to parachurch or mission organizations. Tim Keller describes this as a confusion between lay leadership and lay

⁵ Kyle David Bennett, *Practices of Love: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life of the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017), 172-173.

⁶ Kevin G. Ford, *Transforming Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2007), 8-12.

⁷ Hendrik Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 49-54.

ministry; a church must develop the former (attending to a leaner structure) to enable lay leaders to take up the privileges and responsibilities all believers share to witness in word and deed and exercise their gifts and calling in the world.⁸ Every-member service in ordinary life for cultural renewal is the hoped-for outcome of this project.

Identifying and addressing this challenge over the last two years has been a task of practical theology. *Praxis* is the common name Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez apply to “the whole cycle of reflection and study on one hand and engagement and action on the other” that paves the way for real change to take place.⁹ A person, community, or a church is always engaged in some kind of praxis; there is no pure, one-way flow from theory to action or action to theory. Praxis is the matrix of past experience, present reality, and promised hope, all mediated by the Holy Spirit, in which a church lives and moves forward in its context. One may consciously work through one’s specific praxis in a ministry setting by intentionally going around the circle: describing the current situation, examining context and culture, reflecting on Scripture and theology, and working through story and experimentation to imagine actionable responses to the present situation.¹⁰ The result is a re(new)ed praxis. The benefit of this flow is what Branson and Martinez identify as people formed for “a more thorough and more meaningful relationship with the world” and who “actually shape their own culture and context.”¹¹ The remainder of Part One of this project (chapter one) will examine the

⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 280-281, 272.

⁹ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

situation and stories of Signal Mountain, Chattanooga, and Signal Pres in an effort to closely examine the context of ministry.

Part Two of this project reveals that though the changing cultural situation and curiosity regarding cultural renewal may seem new to this church, biblical and theological reflection show that it should not be surprised. Chapter two works in three sections to review key literature on several fronts. First, two books—one a wide masterwork on the trajectory of Western culture, the other a short history and diagnosis of our American challenge—help name the cultural currents sweeping through this time. Given the focus on “cultural renewal,” grasping the context also means discerning the rising streams (post-Christian and post-modern) and their impact on this community. Second, five books that speak strongly from within the Reformed tradition examine the power of rightly telling and richly showing the true story. They reveal the centrality of the local church community in God’s kingdom in providing leadership that shapes ordinary practices of worship and formation. Those practices in turn re-shape the bodily life (even more than intellectual life) and heart desires of people who live and move with cultural agency in the world. This helps a church grasp the right ends and appropriate means for the church’s work in the renewal of creation. Finally, the last several books offer a more programmatic focus in considering how the institutional church might learn from spirit and structures of the missional movement in adapting itself for renewed training, spiritual practices, and the ministries of cultural renewal.

Chapter three moves from reviewing the literature to laying out a reflection and proposal on the nature of the church’s mission, formation, and ministry of cultural renewal. Drawing on Scripture, theological tradition, and both classic and innovative

practice, this chapter traces the gospel as it runs from creation straight through the fall and redemption to the new creation, revealing God's desire that his entire creation be filled with his glory. A renewed telling of that biblical story in this community and context will help the church recover an ancient-future posture of voluntary exile: called now to be the faithful presence of Christ's love in this world, amidst the work of this world, all for the good of its neighbors and the glory of God. That posture is best taught and imagined through a handful of key Scripture passages from the life of Israel and the early church. Such a church may then set about the difficult work of discipling its people in community as voluntary exiles equipped with wise gestures for the flourishing of life in the various cultural spheres in which God has placed them. Chapter four continues exploring this work of formation by examining how classic habits of spiritual formation cooperate with the story prime the church for action. It concludes by investigating where and how churches might engage in the difficult work of revisioning their structures to be more intentional about sending members into the world for renewed witness and service in cultural domains.

Part Three moves into ministry practice by presenting a detailed, two-part proposal for a ministry that would seek to shape leadership and communities for the work of renewing that wider culture. Chapter five offers first a constructive proposal that seeks to share leadership and teaching in creating an eight-week course of short-term discipleship at Signal Pres. The goal is to equip participants for thinking, seeing, loving, and living in the world according to the biblical story and empowering them to step forward in active leadership within a specific domain of cultural life. To that end, the final phase has the goal of placing them as leaders in small communities of mission that

would hopefully become hubs of invitation to the wider church in participate, witness to the community, and action for the flourishing of local life in a particular domain.

Chapter six surveys the record for initial implementation of the course and the communities to determine their impact within Signal Pres and the community. After considering and evaluating the lack of desired outcome and assessing its cause, this paper seeks to revisit the discussion of praxis (above) and work around the circle again for an ever-cycling learning spiral. It concludes with an initial set of lessons learned and offers a few key recommendations for how this ministry project might be adapted and improved for round two if there is a will to continue or expand its ministry at Signal Pres.

Throughout this work, there is a deep note of hope. There is great promise for retelling the story, recovering a calling, rediscovering the practices of discipleship, and revisioning the church structures to shape cultural renewal. That promise, not anchored in human effort but in the word of God, is that the Lord alone is the one who “from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom 11:36). And this work, regardless of seeming success or failure in any experiment or project, is never a waste when rendered to Christ as labor in him (1 Cor 15:58).

CHAPTER 1:
THE CONTEXT OF SIGNAL MOUNTAIN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church

Signal Pres was organized and founded on April 7, 1929 as a Presbyterian church for the Signal Mountain community. After little more than two years, the church accepted the gift of land and a new chapel to be placed upon it by the Marr family (which remains to this day). As the first church established in the community, it was influential in the formation of other civic institutions in the Signal Mountain community—seen in memories including early police and fire efforts training at the church. It quickly became a center of the growing town and a hub of community life and involvement. Its mission extended to the wider community (beyond the town boundaries and divisions noted below) and included two outpost chapel efforts further north and west to reach children and families in the mountain community that might not come to the church.

Dr. William Thorington (pastor from 1941-67) was an effective leader for the congregation's ministry through a stable early period and expanded the property with a new educational building. Thorington was also instrumental in the life of Signal Mountain community in making inroads to bridge a long-simmering and sharp divide between the "mountain" and "town" community, symbolized by renaming "Division St." to "Timberlinks." During the pastorate of Dr. Woodward (1973-1988), the church grew

somewhat but developed as a tightly-knit and somewhat inward-focused group. It led a campaign to build (but only partially finish) a new, much larger sanctuary in 1980 that would hopefully continue as the center for church and community.

A third critical moment in the church's history was the call of Dr. William Dudley as pastor in 1989. When he arrived, Signal Pres' large, unfinished sanctuary sat somewhat ill-at-ease between the church's goal of mission to the community and its actual ministry, which was marked by a cool formality, a privileging of older members at expense of families and young children, etc. Of three critical moments in the twenty-five years under Dr. Dudley's leadership, the first was the sudden death of his adopted son, David, very early in his ministry at Signal Pres. Dudley himself reflected on the deep paradox of this loss in a conversation in Spring 2017: the personal and communal grief felt by family amid the congregation became a catalyst God used in softening of his heart toward the congregation, theirs toward him and one another, and in opening up avenues for pastoral care and healing in the church's ministry toward one another and the wider community.¹ That pastoral care by Dudley (and by the church toward community) became a hallmark of Signal Pres over the next twenty years. Alongside that, the church experienced a multi-year season of spiritual renewal (often in partnership with Presbyterians for Renewal via their conferences and lay renewals) that began a recovery of the good news of Jesus Christ, life in his love, and witness in his name.

That renewal helped source four streams of ministry at Signal Pres. The first two were a growing heart for mission (seen in funding a staff position to cultivate local

¹ Confirmed in interview by author, Chattanooga, TN, March 6, 2019.

partnerships and an effort to move benevolence giving to one-third of budget expenditures) and a conscious development of both staff and lay members in ministry as many staff and pastoral additions came in 1990s and early 2000s. These two fused when ministry of members was not limited to “inside-the-church” efforts but pushed into communal engagement (often through boards and positions of influence in the wider region). The remaining two streams were a renewed emphasis on youth and children’s ministry (including beginning a ministry to those with special and exceptional needs), and significant building projects to support them: Cornerstone in 2000 (Children and Congregational Fellowship), Keystone in 2008 (Youth), and Memorial Gardens and Columbarium in 2011-2014. Of these four efforts, Dudley made two investments (the local mission partnership/giving and the student ministry) that were at first very tangential to the life and mission of the church—but later grew to be emblematic of its ministry and widely known in the community.²

Perhaps the most memorable fruit from this season of ministry was a fourth key moment in the church’s history: the near-unanimous congregational vote on January 28, 2007, to depart the PC (USA) and be released by the Presbytery of East Tennessee to petition to join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). More than any other meaningful memory, this historical decision has seemed to define the current church membership most when it remembers and thinks about itself and its identity.³ The combination of lay leadership by elders, evangelical zeal, firmness on the authority of

² Bill Dudley and David Swanson, interview by author, Chattanooga, TN, March 6, 2019.

³ “TAG Discovery Report for Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church,” (TAG Consulting Group, June 2018).

Scripture, and future-oriented vision for leadership all factor into what people describe as *the* moment they were standing together, loving one another, and moving ahead. In 2014 the church stood at a membership of 2187, worship attendance of 858, and a budget of 3.4 million.

The summer of 2014 brought a significant period of change for Signal Pres when Dr. Dudley retired as Senior Pastor at the end of a two-year planning and transition process, two other longtime pastors departed (both deeply embedded in the church and community for over a decade), and the church called Scott Bowen as pastor. Despite widespread sentiment that Signal Pres was a unique church that would be spared the difficulties of pastoral transitions (and that Bowen knew the culture as a former staff member), 2015-2016 was a turbulent ride. There were significant membership changes: departure of 552 from membership (many wise membership status was long out of date), 270 down from average worship attendance in 2014, and an addition of 142 new members from mostly younger families).⁴ The church leadership wrestled with hard consequences of not preparing well for the transition and asked difficult questions of theological vision and ministry strategy. After significant debate and searching, the session of Signal Pres adopted in winter 2017 a new mission statement to guide it in the future and direct its ministry efforts: “For the glory of God, who makes all things new, Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church exists to equip all people to live ordinary life as the faithful presence of Jesus’ love.”⁵

⁴ Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church, “Worship Committee Report” (Signal Mountain, TN: spring 2017).

⁵ Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church, “Our Vision,” accessed March 4, 2019, <http://signalpres.org/about/>.

This represented a significant shift of ministry from being oriented to and for the members to one focused on equipping them for their ministry in the wider world. Though the elders were theoretically on the same page with the mission, implementation questions came quickly and forcefully. First, many questions bubbled up from members about the practical implications of such a vision. They coalesced around a few key themes: how one lives ordinary life as the faithful presence of Jesus' love, what neighborhood ministry looks like when "everyone already goes to a church," clarifying "faithful presence," and how changes will impact existing (and beloved) program-based ministries.

On a deeper level, a second set of larger issues were rising to the surface. Longevity and continuity of both membership and leadership meant anxiety around significant pastoral team turnover that left people feeling "unknown." Fear over threatening changes in church and wider community found refuge in nostalgia for better and more-connected times. In a church where the leadership (staff and elders) had become accustomed to taking direction from a strong pastoral staff, four big issues seemed to be in flux: what strategy to embrace for pastoral care (pastor-centered or congregationally-delivered care), for worship (formal and traditional, modern, or some combination), for discipleship (classes, groups, mid-week programming, or something else), and for the structure and roles of the session itself (elders as board, as program administrators, or as shepherds). All of this contributed to a perfect storm that resulted in a paralysis of decision-making.

It became increasingly obvious both to me and one of our new pastors that we lacked a shared understanding of the key, unspoken values that defined the culture of

Signal Pres and we needed new forms of ministry that would give shape to the mission in a changing context. At the same time, I was finishing off my coursework for the Doctor of Ministry and thought it would be a perfect time for an experiment in discipling for the work of cultural renewal.

The Context of Signal Mountain and Chattanooga, Tennessee

The city of Chattanooga sits in the Tennessee River valley and is framed by Lookout Mountain, Signal Mountain, and Missionary Ridge. A historic southern city, Chattanooga has gone through a significant transformation from a period of post-war industrial hangover to a paragon of the mid-sized city in the new South. Over the last thirty years, millions of dollars have been spent in public and private partnerships to “revitalize the city and reorient the economy around tourism and the high-tech industry.”⁶ Chattanooga has heavily invested in the riverfront and recreational access, attracted major industrial, logistics, and healthcare jobs, and enjoyed a booming population coupled with a low unemployment rate below the regional and national average. By 2015, Chattanooga had twice won *Outside Magazine*’s “Best Town Ever” award.⁷

The fundamental issue in Chattanooga right now depends on which story one chooses to tell of the city. In one version, there is plenty of good to speak of: there is a massive non-profit and giving sector, a major focus on strengthening children and families, high church per capita and biblical literacy rates, intense downtown economic

⁶ CHA2.0, “Building the Smartest Community in the South,” accessed March 4, 2019, <https://chatt2.org/>.

⁷ Graham Averill, “Weekend Plan: Chattanooga,” *Outside Online*, August 18, 2015, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.outsideonline.com/2008701/weekend-plan-chattanooga>.

and cultural redevelopment, and so on. But there is another version of the story that is not so good (and often underreported). There is a rising wealth/poverty and inequality gap, a gentrification and an affordable housing issue, a widening educational gap, steady racial and ethnic tension, and a trend back toward a more segregated city. The latter is what David Cook calls “the little white lie” of Chattanooga: the gaping separation of the city that means growth for whites, decrease for blacks.⁸

Signal Mountain sits atop a literal mountain (occupying Walden Ridge, part of the Cumberland Plateau) rising nearly a thousand feet above Chattanooga in the valley. Originally begun as a private development of summer homes and a resort community, the town incorporated by charter from the state legislature on April 4, 1919, and quickly grew as a community amidst a historically agricultural area.⁹ The property of Signal Pres lies in this original area, now known as “Old Town.” The rapid growth of the town (and its initial history as a retreat for wealthy locals from the wider Chattanooga area) created some tension with the poorer, mountainous and agricultural area. Over time, Signal Mountain essentially become a suburb of Chattanooga with the vast majority of residents employed in the wider Chattanooga area.

Perhaps the most critical factor in the recent growth and development of Signal Mountain has been the town’s partnership with the Hamilton County Department of Education to build a new local Middle and High School after a ten-year effort

⁸ David Cook, “Chattanooga and the Little White Lie,” *The Times Free Press*, April 14, 2019, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/opinion/columns/story/2019/apr/14/cook-chattanoogand-little-white-lie/492532/>.

⁹ “About Signal Mountain,” Signal Mountain Town Government, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://signalmountaintn.gov/about/>.

culminating in 2008.¹⁰ Though Signal Mountain long prized education at the elementary and middle level, the lack of a public high school prior to 2008 left residents choosing between Chattanooga's many, historic private schools or the public high school off the mountain in Red Bank. Since 2000, property values have nearly doubled and the population has grown 14.7 percent, with expectations of further growth of 5-10 percent by 2023.¹¹¹²

Signal Mountain's influence outstrips its small size. Demographic estimates for Signal Mountain proper put the population at 8,519 (2014), a median household income reported at \$95,599 (2016), and ethnic composition at 96.2 percent white (2016).¹³ When the neighboring town of Walden (virtually indistinguishable as a separate entity) is added in, many people describe Signal Mountain as 10,000-12,000 people. By 2015 Signal Mountain was ranked 15th of the top 50 suburbs in America.¹⁴ There is no small amount of communal pride in Signal Mountain's high student achievement, quality of life, quality and value of housing, vast access to recreation (organized or outdoors), or the fact that its

¹⁰ Ruth Robinson, "Signal Mountain Middle / High Dedicated," TheChattanooga.com, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.chattanooga.com/2008/7/31/132441/Signal-Mountain-MiddleHigh-School-Dedicated.aspx>.

¹¹ "Signal Mountain, TN," Onboard Infomatics, accessed March 4, 2019, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Signal-Mountain-Tennessee.html>.

¹² "TAG Discovery Report," 54-55.

¹³ "Signal Mountain, TN."

¹⁴ Talia Avakian and Brittany Fowler, "Ranked: The 50 Best Suburbs in America," *Business Insider*, October 21, 2105, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ranked-the-50-best-suburbs-in-america-2015-10#15-signal-mountain-tennessee-36>.

professional class has a high degree of leadership and influence in Chattanooga's firms, businesses, institutions, and non-profits.

Taken as a whole, the Signal Mountain community's residents tend to be wealthier, more highly-educated, more ethnically homogeneous, job and career-focused, revolve around families (as housing prices and employment factors mean most residents are family households), and somewhat more able to sustain a feeling of isolation or separateness from the wider world. A growing edge of the community is labeled "new country families"—prosperous and living on larger lots in non-urban areas.¹⁵ The town is marked by a much more stable community that feels less effects from the transience and mobility that mark modern society. One of the well-worn quips on Signal Mountain compares it to the frozen-in-time, fictional "1930s" Mayberry of the long-running Andy Griffith show.¹⁶ There is a deep love and loyalty for the town, schools, city, region, and country that continues to draw people back and both attract and keep those who come for college or new jobs. Much of that is owed to long generational family lines: it is not uncommon at Signal Pres to have three or more generations of the same family worshipping together. There is exceptional generational longevity (seen in a higher-than-average percentage of empty nesters and a thriving retirement village).

The demographic shifts, attractiveness to outsiders moving in, and quest for achievement have not mixed well with the historic ideal of the town and its traditional, relational community. What was once a consolidated community that took core

¹⁵ "TAG Discovery Report," 68-69.

¹⁶ "Andy Griffith and Don Knotts on The Today Show," NBC Today Show, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ahbyf9cbEU> March 4, 1996, retrieved September 10, 2012. Cited in "The Andy Griffith Show," accessed March 5, 2019, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Andy_Griffith_Show.

convictions and traditional social roles for granted has seen some of the same fracturing as many other American communities. Fault lines like educational achievement, private vs. public schools, wealth and poverty, national (and local) political loyalties and control, pro- or anti-growth and development (and accompanying economic, religious, and ethnic diversity) have widened and stressed the relational connectedness of the community.

Two particular features have shown signs of stress: generational connectedness and institutional trust. Local political elections, school accountability discussions, and even church leadership changes have become more volatile (with recalls, campaigns, and new faces) as men and women are increasingly suspicious of institutions and those who steward them. There is an ongoing generational transition as well, as demographic shifts reveal a “cultural gap separating older generations from younger ones ... millennials are perceived by older generations as those who need to ‘grow up’ and ‘get their act together,’ while older generations are seen by millennials as those who ‘don’t know what they’re doing’” and are hanging on too long.¹⁷ As a younger generation (usually with children) moves onto Signal Mountain, there has been even less shared knowledge and relationship across the generations. Different generations are more likely to retreat into different spaces or spheres, reflecting fewer family ties (across generations) and resulting in less communal or cultural engagement. The consequence is a disconnection and climate of mistrust that has replaced shared experience and faith in the community.

¹⁷ Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church pastors, “Whitepaper on Ten Megatrends surrounding Signal Pres,” Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church, (Signal Mountain, TN, March 2019).

Present Discipleship Challenges

Just as a landscape provides physical features for a traveler to contend with, a social and cultural context provides challenges for those in ministry. At least some of the difficulty faced in the context of Signal Mountain and ministry at Signal Pres is due to the trends sweeping the wider late- or post-modern Western culture. These impact cultural commitments and priorities that carry relational consequences for the church, the community, and the bonds between them. They ultimately prod the church to reconsider questions of mission.

Cultural Commitments and Priorities

First, there is the technological revolution of the digital age. While it is transforming for all ages, it may be more obvious and influential as the daily reality of the youngest generation. This Generation Z are those “are growing up with smartphones, have an Instagram account before they start high school, and do not remember a time before the internet”—earning the nickname “iGen.”¹⁸ The ubiquity of technology in their world is such that more than half of teenagers in a 2015 national study “admit they use a screen four or more hours a day; one-quarter admits to *eight* or more hours.”¹⁹ In an affluent community with additional family ties, the available options are more widespread. The lure here is meaningful personal display and connection with the entertainment one consumes in a social way (physical or digitally connected with others).

¹⁸ Jean M. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September 2017, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>.

¹⁹ Barna Group and Impact 360 Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*, (n.p.: Barna Group and Impact 360 Group, 2018), 16.

Increasingly, we in the student ministry at Signal Pres see the growing reality of work, homework, and research that must be submitted or performed online.

Second, the school calendar has influenced everything. When considering the schedule of those between the ages thirty and fifty-five on Signal Mountain, the vast majority of whom have school-age children, the entire family calendar and priorities revolve around the school. School and its related activities (from clubs to sports to homework to cultural events) have become the hub for connection with others, the source and stream of most cultural activities, and the chief factor when planning ahead. In the fall of 2014, even Signal Pres finally reconfigured its annual ministry calendar to adjust to this new reality instead of preserving traditional start and end dates for ministry that did not connect with schools or factor in their breaks. Attendance closely tracks the school year and drops much lower during major holidays, breaks, and summer.

Third, there is a widening education and achievement gap in an upwardly-mobile, high-achieving culture. Description here is difficult, but the nostalgia for a by-gone era of consolidation and an even playing field on Signal Mountain has been replaced with a highly competitive environment which yields a growing divide on education and achievement. As Matthew Stewart describes it in an essay on the new American aristocracy, “[W]e are the people of good family, good health, good schools, good neighborhoods, and good jobs. We may want to call ourselves the “5Gs” rather than the 9.9 percent.”²⁰ His phrase offers a near litany for the cultural catechesis of the children in this community: go to a school to get good grades, to get into a good college, to get a

²⁰ Matthew Stewart, “The 9.9 Percent is the New American Aristocracy,” *The Atlantic*, June 2018, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/06/the-birth-of-a-new-american-aristocracy/559130/>.

good job, to make a lot of money, to have a good family and good health, so one can be happy. The chief end is personal happiness and the means and practices are ever-increasing achievement. David Brooks describes this as a culture that prioritizes the “resume virtues ... the skills you bring to the marketplace.”²¹ Even social connection becomes comparison and presents an opportunity for competition. Whether graduation rates, select college acceptances and scholarship awards, travel team echelons of youth sports, or test scores, measurement and status reign.

Finally, these combine to bring out the question of identity and foreground it front and center. Identity has become the central quest of our time with personal agency and choice the central means for accomplishing it. Creating one’s identity—establishing, living into, and finding affirmation and acceptance of it by others—has become the holy grail of our time among the younger generations. In a world that has shifted from identity being determined by one’s place, family, or social role, identity today is often derived from one’s personal accomplishments (including work), friends, and personal choices. These three concerns reveal that the question of identity formation—long one of the three critical tasks of adolescent development—is increasingly being answered by means of the other two: affinity (where one belongs) and autonomy (how one’s choices matter). The conclusion appears to be that a person knows who she is by where (and to whom) she belongs and what she does and can accomplish. In all this, “the kids are not OK:” for the first time, the new generation places achievement and financial success at the top of

²¹ David Brooks, “The Moral Bucket List,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2015, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>.

identity markers beyond family, faith, or friendships.²² Identity markers tend to reveal idols, and it makes sense that the post-modern idols of today go by the names of market-driven achievement and immediate experience of approval rather than “family, race, nation,” or religion.²³ What feels like “freedom of choice” that allows one to be an instrumentalist in terms of relationships, work, and activity becomes a servitude to whomever or whatever can give identity.

Relational Consequences

It is a commonplace in American culture to comment on the relational consequences of this age. We Americans are disconnected, detached, distracted, and divided, but we are less clear on how we got here. One driver of this reality is the deep intellectual current of “dissolution” that has severed truth from reality, leaving personal experience the arbiter of all things and the individual or group with “no fixed points of reference,” able to “question everything” but affirm little to nothing.²⁴ This force is matched by the parallel social drive toward diffusion over the last seventy years that has come to pit the needs and desires of the individual over and above those of the group. Nearly every facet of society has felt its effects: politics, economics, work, education, religion, community organizations, marriage, and family.²⁵ An anxious, “emerging

²² Barna, *Gen Z*, 42-43, 52.

²³ Timothy Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 143-145, 135.

²⁴ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 205-208.

²⁵ Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 66-70.

isolation” was the result as new attempts at social connectedness have failed to deliver on their promises and pressed the individualism forward.²⁶ Adding to that, the national consciousness over the last twenty years has been dominated by the shadow of 9/11 and security concerns, economic instability, and partisan political division. At the personal level, the digital revolution has permeated every facet of society, promising ever-greater opportunities for connection but paradoxically leaving people in the prism of self and hampering the ability to form meaningful relationships.

On the local front, these larger cultural trends have pressed in from a couple of key directions. The “high-tech” and “low-touch” culture has arrived on Signal Mountain: many can telecommute for work, every older elementary child or middle schooler seems to have a smartphone, schools private and public have adopted the technological changes wholesale, and the attraction of screen time dominates nearly every waking hour (and even some devoted to sleeping). Attention has become “the new currency.”²⁷ There has been an observable delay in students seeking drivers’ licenses, both because of the availability of ride-sharing and the reality that one’s social circle and connections can be on real-time video from anywhere. With far less need to leave the house but hours upon hours devoted to work and schedule and seeking connections, people have become more likely to stay home and have life delivered on their own time rather than rub shoulders as in many of the mediating communities—whether grocery stores or churches or restaurants. People have confessed to not knowing their neighbors and awkwardly lament

²⁶ Ibid., 74.

²⁷ Arnoop Gupta, “Attention is the New Currency,” *Huffpost*, April 13, 2017, accessed March 6, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/attention-is-the-new-currency_us_58ef947ee4b04cae050dc526.

feeling more connection with the barista at their coffee stop or the bartender at the taproom. The forms of community that do remain interpersonally mediated on Signal Mountain have begun to revolve around the activities of children and schools: school buildings, ballfields, band rooms and theaters, service or social organizations, and academically challenging opportunities. It has become easier to observe meaningful community forming around the particular spheres of cultural activity of athletics, academics, arts, entertainment, education, and work. That is an expected outcome when a strong desire for personal contribution couples with an expectation to create and collaborate—two further trends in a digital society, particularly among the younger generation.²⁸ The networks around these activities have begun replacing physical neighborhoods as the primary places of relational engagement.

Church and Community

The church is not immune to these changes. One of the larger realizations to steadily creep in is that churches are no longer central to the community. The Chattanooga area remains in the southern “Bible Belt:” it has a higher-than-average number of churches per capita, number of people who identify as practicing Christians regularly attending worship, and it tops the ranks of biblical literacy (the number one “Bible-minded city”).²⁹³⁰ But there is growing evidence that a post-Christian culture’s

²⁸ “Ten Megatrends.”

²⁹ Barna Group, “Chattanooga, TN City Report 2017-2018,” Barna Cities Report, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://shop.barna.com/products/cities-2017-individual-city-reports-a-m?variant=37443886860>.

³⁰ Barna Group, “2017 Bible Minded Cities,” Barna.org, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/2017-bible-minded-cities/>.

arrival is immanent, much like the crest of a coming wave that is nearing a the crash on the shore. Unlike older generations, the statistics for Millennials (both churchd and unchurchd) in Chattanooga track with the national averages of churchd versus unchurchd.³¹ For Generation Z (born after 1999) across the country, fully 57 percent report being unchurchd (7 percent of whom are other faiths and 34 percent claim no religious affiliation).³² People in this culture are increasingly secular in two particular ways. First, the numbers seem to be growing in the observable sense of no longer identifying a personal faith in God, or consciously affiliating with a religious tradition, or even regularly participating in one. Observable phenomena here are lower church attendance, less pretension otherwise among people, and a decline in prominence of church rallies, crusades, gatherings of prayer. Despite long-time Signal Mountain residents' assumptions that everyone goes to a church, local demographic evidence points to 30 percent or higher at "no faith involvement" and anecdotal evidence suggests that could be functionally much higher.³³ Second, there is a deeper sense among people that they now inhabit "a secular age": where the growing curve is a default world-and life-view and background where belief in God is "no longer axiomatic."³⁴ Indeed, believing may be more exception than rule.

³¹ Barna, "Chattanooga, TN City Report 2017-2018."

³² Barna, *Gen Z*, 26.

³³ "TAG Discovery Report," 63-64.

³⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

The consequence of those trends (or the presenting symptoms that go along with the diagnosis) are seen in the growing realization that the church is no longer the hub of the physical or relational/connectional community. Signal Mountain and Chattanooga are increasingly comfortable with alternative activities on Sunday mornings—from races to baseball playoffs to soccer tournaments to open-air markets—that used to take place on other days. Sunday has become “the new Saturday” for many: another day to catch up on recreation and rest that Saturday used to provide before it, too, became business as usual. Further, the church—even Signal Pres as the big evangelical church in the small town—is no longer the place new residents think of joining when moving to the community, or the resource or haven for those in a time of need, or even the place one goes for social standing, business connection, or simple welcome and friendship. Even the prominent local grocery store has recognized this and rebranded itself as the new “Community Hub.” Churches might mourn this, but there is little sign the community even realizes it.

As the elders at Signal Pres began to consider the wider societal shifts and major trends in our culture, it became increasingly clear that signs (like those above) were pointing to the arrival of a more post-Christian culture even on Signal Mountain. Those conclusions helped bring urgency to the biblical picture of the focus and purpose of the church. As we as elders examined in a study by a task force of the Signal Pres session in 2016, God has a mission for his Church in the world to go into the world as his authorized ambassadors to bear witness in “ordinary life” with gospel intentionality.³⁵ The paradox is that the declining influence of the church pulls back the cultural blinds to

³⁵ J. Scott Bowen, “God Making His Appeal Through Us,” (Signal Mountain, TN, Fall 2016). On ordinary life and gospel intentionality, see Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 18.

reveal a unique spiritual opportunity to rediscover the the gospel of Jesus Christ both for ourselves as a church and for our neighbors in the wider community and the world. That calls for the ongoing conversion of the church in general and Signal Pres in particular.

Church as Place of Ministry or People on Mission

When the leadership of Signal Pres (both staff and elders) took a self-inventory over winter 2018-19 and examined these trends and various models of ministry, we admitted that we had been long-tailored for a church-in-Christendom perspective adapted for a pre-1950 print-based culture.³⁶ As a large evangelical church in a small-town, Signal Pres had operated with a functionally attractional strategy that privileged the church as the place of ministry, members and guests as the people ministered to, ministry as performed by the staff and leaders, and relied on mission and evangelism methods that focused on inviting others here (to the ministry at the church) or financial giving or going out there (in far-flung areas of the world). When one looks at many of the strengths that the membership named about the church, they prioritized the systems and structures that supported such ministry: excellent buildings, healthy budgets, strong pastoral care for members, excellent programs for children, youth, and families, and a heavy emphasis on preaching/teaching/learning environments.³⁷ Through maintenance, communal change, and the appeal of a consumer mindset, the church's default seemed to have shifted to an inward focus rather than an outward one.

³⁶ Personal conversations, Signal Mountain, TN, November 9, 2018 and January 12, 2019.

³⁷ "TAG Discovery Report," 5-8.

Under the newer paradigm of a more missional focus, the leadership of Jesus by his Spirit in mission and witness becomes the umbrella for the church's purpose, existence, and life together (Jn 20:21; Acts 1:6-8; Mt 28:19-20). There is ministry to do that might take place on the church property (gatherings of public worship and some forms of the leadership equipping the saints), but the church needs to recover the real ministry and service of the saints that takes place in the public life of the world rather the cloistered wall of the church building. Seen in that light, the Signal Mountain community may comprise the base of operations for Signal Pres (and the church itself a kingdom outpost for that purpose), but it need not be the whole focus of its sphere of ministry.

Signal Pres faces a question of missional living and whether we will do “whatever it takes to make sure that everyone within our reach encounters the gospel.”³⁸ Both the Chattanooga region and the wider world in this richly-connected age are becoming arenas for the message to be incarnated in new forms of ministry. That reality has prompted the church to consider how its next form of lay ministry development is not merely growing leaders within the church for ministry inside the church, but more fundamentally training disciples increasingly equipped for leadership in their God-given work of cultural renewal as agents of the risen and reigning Jesus Christ. The kind of ministry that disciples members and equips them for gospel intentionality in their ordinary life of cultural renewal may take only a conspiracy of a few to begin coupled with a clear commitment to see it through. Working toward this goal cuts the last cord of a dualistic, Christendom-style-ministry that privileges a sacred realm (spaces, people, and roles) over

³⁸ Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church, “Enduring Values,” 2018.

and against the secular as the ordinary. It seeks a new vision (“re-story-ing”) to see Christ at work in the world, calling (recovered), habits and practices (renewed) to be formed for the mission of joining Jesus in the work of renewing all things, and structures (revisioned) for sending the church out for the good of our neighbors and the glory of God.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW
The Wider Culture

A brief statement of the thesis of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* comes in his own words: "A secular age is one in which 'the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing' becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people."¹ Taylor defines secular in this unique sense rather than common uses of the word: either "public spaces ... emptied of God, or any references to ultimate reality" or the "the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning in away from God, and no longer going to church".² He is after a much bigger story than those two uses of the word typically tell: the story of how our lived experience and background understanding shifted in the Western world over this time. Taylor's core argument is that in a span of 500 years, from 1500 onward, the world shifted in terms of "conditions of belief:" it moved "from a society where in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human

¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19-20.

² Ibid., 2.

possibility among others [B]elief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.”³

Taylor argues that the usual telling of that shift—as a “subtraction story” where humans elevated reason, discovered science, no longer needed God, and therefore dismissed religion—misses the mark in crucial ways. He instead details a complex social history that sees the emergence of a brand-new option that he names “exclusive humanism.” To get there, Taylor writes about religious belief not merely in terms of confession or worldview, but the practical shape it gives to life. The believing option is where one’s personal flourishing (and human flourishing in general) takes its cue from and is determined by a transcendent reality and a good or an end “beyond” ourselves. The contrast now is the new, modern development (over 500 years) that one’s sense of fullness of life and personal flourishing is unhooked from any transcendent reality and fully included in “the immanent frame.” It is this secularity, a self-sufficient humanism as opposed to religious belief, that is that is the default option and background condition for humanity in the twenty-first century Western world.

Taylor develops a rich and memorable lexicon in narrating this cultural history, and four of his concepts have become their own kind of frame through which later modern people might better grasp their own world. First, Taylor describes a shift from an “enchanted” world (no split between physical reality and transcendent reality of spiritual beings and forces) to a “disenchanted” one (a firmly-bounded physical reality with no transcendent agency).⁴ The corresponding shift is from a “porous” self (susceptible to forces

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

⁴ Ibid., 35.

and agents and meanings “out there” and more reliant on communal solidarity) to a “bounded, buffered self:” one where it is possible to find meaning and purpose and agency all within oneself in a narrowing circle of personal intimacy disengaged from others, the natural world, and God.⁵ Second, Taylor calls this “the eclipse” of the transcendent and the move to “the immanent frame.”⁶ He credits the early-modern Age of Reform and its campaign by its religious and political elites with arriving a “new concept of human flourishing” by redefining the goal for social order (“a matter purely of human flourishing”) and the means to accomplish it (“a purely human capacity”)—all without reference to God.⁷

The consequence is what Taylor names the “Modern Moral Order” where the individual is the basic unit and the communal structures exist to serve his or her ends.⁸ It has so shaped our “social imaginary” that new facets like the economy, the public sphere, and the idea of a sovereign people have all combined to create a “direct-access society” where everything is individual, impersonal, and egalitarian for maximum freedom and mutual benefit.⁹ In a direct-access society, a person’s commitments define his or her belonging and derives identity. This creates a need for new moral sources with motivations internal to human beings such as one’s reason, will, sense universal

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29-34, 38-40, 42.

⁶ Ibid., 59. See also 540-542.

⁷ Ibid., 103, 84.

⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁹ Ibid., 171-172. “...the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their surroundings” in a “common understanding that makes possible common practices.”

sympathy/compassion, etc.¹⁰ It is a functional anthropocentrism: one's highest goals and deepest moral aspirations now flow from sources within oneself. Taylor's point is that "All contemporary unbelief is still marked by that origin" story no matter whether the options for unbelief start or split off from there.¹¹ To zoom forward in his story, the outcome was an "expressivist revolution" in late-mid twentieth century that ushered in an age authenticity (the self living its desires) and the accompanying social moral code of "soft relativism."¹²

Finally, Taylor describes each one of the bewildering "variety of moral/spiritual options"¹³ we now have available as "*cross-pressured*" in an uneasy coexistence with others. Cross-pressure refers to feeling caught between dynamics of belief and unbelief and fumbling in a spiritual search for a third option of one's own.¹⁴ It would be a mistake to mis-read this as a simple choice between belief or unbelief. Each person, no matter where on the spectrum of belief-unbelief, now has a question mark hanging over his or her spiritual and moral search where all conclusions are fragile and subject to change.¹⁵ This lived condition thrives in what Taylor calls the modern cosmic imaginary: people's sense that they live in the deep and dark abyss of time in an impersonal universe which equally makes them aware of a wonderful world without (and within), fills them with

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 245, 255.

¹¹ Ibid., 268.

¹² Ibid., 473-476.

¹³ Ibid., 299.

¹⁴ Ibid., 302.

¹⁵ Ibid., 303.

awe (at their greatness), and terrifies them with violent force and troubles their hearts.¹⁶

One can live there just as easily, suspended in doubt, with or without making any commitments to transcendence or immanence as the key to reality.¹⁷

According to Taylor, we late-modern humans in the West find ourselves living in a disenchanted world marked out by this immanent frame with its direct-access society, buffered individualism, an exploding array of options for exclusive humanism, cross-pressured all the time.¹⁸ It is an “unquiet frontier:” unstable, uneasy, and spiritually hungry in light of the massive, near-universal moral demands placed on us for “solidarity” with and “benevolence” toward the other.¹⁹

The direct consequence for discipleship for cultural renewal is the recognition that new situations demand new solutions. It is not a matter of teaching a new worldview or apologetics class, nor assuming people can build naïve partnerships based around a pre-existing common good. Rather, a deep engagement is called for: one that names the common good, does so from within a particular story of God and the world with sensitivity toward neighbors who don’t share that, and is expressed in a lived reality that privileges thick community and personal engagement. It should beware defining human flourishing as an end (or means) that is somehow achievable without God. It should struggle against the unquestioned cultural assumptions by exposing the inability of the idols of our time—particularly the demands of solidarity/benevolence when the

¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 347-351.

¹⁷ Ibid., 404.

¹⁸ Ibid., 540-542.

¹⁹ Ibid., 695.

individualism of buffered selves, and market consumerism reigns. It should recognize that the lack of integration between Christian faith and the rest of life contributes to (and exacerbated by) a whole social imaginary opposed to it and one that needs to be “re-story-ed.”

Where Taylor writes for Western cultural history as a whole, Yuval Levin looks specifically at the last century of American life. In *The Fractured Republic*, Levin makes both a diagnosis of what ails our modern American society and offers a prescription for restoring its health.²⁰ Levin thinks that our prevailing political and social frustrations are a result of misdiagnosing our problem as the fault of “the other side” (often left or right) in some key area. This “failure of self-understanding” creates an illusion about our current reality that leaves us stuck in nostalgia, longing for a return to the good times symbolized by different decades in the second half of the twentieth century: the 1960s for liberals, the 1950s (culturally) and 1980s (economically) for conservatives.²¹ But Levin writes that our actual predicament is the mixed results from a seven-decade long “single complex but coherent trajectory of increasing individualism, diversity, dynamics, and liberalization.²² We are cross-pressured by hyper-individualism (“atomism”) or some national identity and platform for action (“collectivism”).²³

²⁰ For the remainder of this section, “we/us” or “our” refers to the American experience.

²¹ Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, 2.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 4.

To tell this story, Levin argues from history that the first half of the 20th century was dominated by a drive toward modernization that meant consolidation at every level of society. The resulting age of national conformity (most clearly seen in the Second World War and years immediately after) began to quickly unravel: “as solidarity had an underside of repression so liberalization had an underside of chaos.”²⁴ The steady press of the four forces above over the seven decades since have become a wave of great diffusion through every sphere and structure of or shared life—culture, economics, religion, politics, work, family, and more. Levin demonstrates three key consequences of this: “The weakening of established institutions, a growing detachment from the traditional sources of order and structure in American life, and an intensifying bifurcation of ways of living.”²⁵

Those consequences set the stage for the prescription Levin offers as antidote to our ills. He calls us to “work toward a modernized politics of subsidiarity,” recovering and renewing the institutions and relationships that put “power, authority, and significance as close to the level of the interpersonal community as reasonably possible.”²⁶ Levin carefully charts out that our society is being pulled apart in two directions at every level (not just economics and “inequality”) leaving a “hollowing out of the middle and greater concentration at both ends.”²⁷ He argues that we must harness

²⁴ Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, 46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

the dynamism of the forces of diffusion and decentralization that we plainly value and put them to work through the middle layers and mediating institutions to create more stability, cohesion, and opportunity for all.²⁸ The second half of *the Fractured Republic* presents Levin's specific proposals in economics, culture, and politics for how we might reject both national collectivism and hyper individualism. He advocates reinvesting in mediating layers of culture to create new options for public life rather than resuscitating policy solutions from a bygone age.

Some of Levin's arguments make for comparison with and application of Taylor's insights on the "cross-pressured" nature of modern life (one pole increasingly identified in opposition to another) and the explosions of alternatives to a once-consolidated cultural reality. Levin consistently presses us to find new solutions that will take new forms—even if they recover and revive older, traditional institutions like family, work, marriage, church, and so forth. A dive back into the middle layers of life to renew the social bonds of interpersonal contact at local level will help create a "pluralism of communities" that "resist conformism and individualism."²⁹ He argues that those who lean conservative must also build cohesive, attractive, moral subcultures as a statement of "yes!" to the world rather than rely on a defensive struggle to control old, national institutions. Not every subculture can just say "yes" to the world without a "no" of solid resistance as well, and Levin argues that the more liberal-leaning need to guard the freedom for groups to do just that. He wants us to celebrate cultural diversity and dynamism, not be afraid of it or repress it.

²⁸ Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, 97-98.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

There are two critical connections from Levin's argument to this particular project of cultural renewal. First, he acknowledges that the drive of individual expressivism has "set loose a scourge of loneliness and isolation that we are still afraid to acknowledge as the distinct social dysfunction of our age of individuals."³⁰ Far from demonstrating immunity here, the church (among religious communities in general) and evangelical Christianity in particular has devolved into a decentralized, personalized form of faith.³¹ That points to an even greater need for the church to relearn communal life for itself and recover it as both a model and a form of witness to its neighbors gasping for connection in the late modern world.

Second, the only way he thinks Americans can reinvest in our social order is to recover a concept of citizenship and the common good. Levin repeatedly turns to the means of local solidarity—face-to-face, interpersonal, collaborative work—as the way for people to "contribute to their society as well as to their community."³² The primary venue for that work is reengaging in local institutions as culture-forming forces that have the power to shape our practice and thereby form (rather than malform) our desires themselves.³³ He names five specific institutions that must be recovered and revived: the family, work, education, civic engagement, and religious community.³⁴ Doing so would

³⁰ Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, 93.

³¹ Ibid., 66. He notes that while evangelicals are more conservative than mainline forms, they are more structurally diffuse.

³² Ibid., 183.

³³ Ibid., 152-153.

³⁴ Ibid., 202.

renew citizenship itself, and the freedom and authority to exercise virtue on behalf of others rather than simply ourselves.³⁵ If he is right that “bifurcated concentration” is our new default pattern, and momentum at the upper end is in the direction of consolidating gains and extending them for personal benefit, then a town like Signal Mountain has a powerful opportunity. It can either extend its existence and reputation as a privileged enclave (wealthier and more homogenized) or it can leverage its gifts for the common good of its wider community and region. For the latter to happen, the church has a powerful part to play in re-teaching its members the posture of faithful presence in the cultural realities of our world.

A Truer Story and Better Habits

The second section of this literature review inquires about the nature of the big gospel story that includes an understanding of cultural work and renewal that apply in our current context. Learning from and living with a gospel of cultural renewal means looking hard at the liturgies which shape the heart. This is the subject of James K. A. Smith’s three books in the Cultural Liturgies Series. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith argues for a philosophical anthropology of people as “desiring creatures:” “affective animals whose worlds are made more by the imagination than by the intellect.”³⁶ That argument extends into the ways we are formed by liturgies (practices and habits) for agency and action in this world as representatives of an altogether different kingdom. He uses both discursive argument and explorations into the arts to teach a gospel for cultural

³⁵ Ibid., 214-215.

³⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, vol 2 of *Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), xii.

renewal that speaks equally well to mind, heart, and body in the realities of a church awaiting the return of its King.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith is “pushing down through worldview to worship as the matrix from which a Christian worldview is born” and pressing into the implications for those working to shape Christian worship and education.³⁷ Smith puts forward a philosophical anthropology (what a human person is) that draws heavily on Augustine to claim that we are more fundamentally desiring (loving) creatures than we are thinking or believing ones. He argues that “we human creatures are lovers before and above all else, and that the people of God is a community marked by love and desire for the kingdom of God.”³⁸ His foil throughout the book is the standard “bobble head” mode of Christian education that focuses primarily on worldview formation. Smith thinks that mode has largely failed due to a misguided anthropology that remains stuck in a dualistic, reductionistic, modernist paradigm and leaves people captive to formation by the world.³⁹ Since education is less a matter of “absorption of ideas and information” and more one of “*formation* of hearts and desires,” Christian education must rely less on practices that treat people as “brains on sticks” and instead relearn habits and practices that form “a certain kind of people whose hearts and passions and desires are aimed at the kingdom of God.”⁴⁰

³⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol 1 of *Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 11.

³⁸ Ibid., 15.

³⁹ Ibid., 41-45.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

Smith lays out an account of who we are and how we learn by telling the Christian story that we are whole-person lovers, made to rightly love God, others, and his whole creation.⁴¹ As lovers, one is what one loves, for “our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends.”⁴² There are four key elements: intentionality (love always has an “aim”), teleology (the “end” or target of love’s aim, always a desired picture of “human flourishing”), the “habits” of the heart (dispositions which lead to actions) that turn or aim the heart toward given ends, and the bodily “practices” that form and train those habits.⁴³ It is these practices that are necessarily communal (social, not private) and institutional, caught from (and taught by) a “social imaginary”—the background understanding that evokes a certain kind life in the world.⁴⁴ All cultural institutions in our world, then, come loaded with these deep, habit-forming (and therefore heart-shaping) practices.⁴⁵

Smith demonstrates that the strongest and thickest of these practices “have a *liturgical* function”—they “shape our identity by shaping our desire for what we envision as the kingdom, the ideal of human flourishing.”⁴⁶ “Liturgies” are Smith’s handle for practices formative of habits. All “liturgies—whether ‘sacred’ or ‘secular’—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic

⁴¹ Smith, *Desiring*, 34-35.

⁴² Ibid., 40.

⁴³ Ibid., 58. See 48-62.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 62-63.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 72-73.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 87.

attunement to the world... [they] make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we *love*.”⁴⁷ Every liturgy is a teacher and trainer that carries “an implicit worldview or ‘understanding’ of the world” that aims the heart (more than the head) at what it is to love. We human beings worship what we love most, and we become like whatever we worship as it forms our identity and character.⁴⁸

As Smith puts it, “The primary goal of Christian education is the formation of a peculiar people—a people who desire the kingdom of God and thus undertake their vocations as an expression of that desire.”⁴⁹ The problem is that we Christian people are subject to such formation everywhere, always—not just by the church, but by all other actors and institutions in our cultural lives.⁵⁰ Smith is often at his best when exegeting such “secular” cultural liturgies (transcendence at the mall, sacrificial violence in the flag-waving stadium, or a university classroom that is a cathedral for creating consumer-producers), or when he proposes that Victoria’s Secret has a more creational, incarnational, and “holistic anthropology than most of the (evangelical) church.”⁵¹

But the real benefit is Smith’s explication of the liturgy of classic Christian gathered worship. This work is crucial to his argument for revising specifically Christian education. As worship and its (un?)conscious liturgical practices are prior to our beliefs,

⁴⁷ Smith, *Desiring*, 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁵¹ Ibid., 76.

practices precede (and set) our priorities.⁵² If we are human beings made by a good God, given stewardship of our lives, and graciously redeemed by that God to participate afresh in his kingdom, then we need the appropriate practices and habits to train our hearts and aim our intention toward the vision of life with God in that kingdom, here and now. All that is within us, from “precognitive tendencies” or deliberate actions, needs to be dug up, surrendered to Jesus, and reshaped toward his kingdom. Christian worship is a kind of counter-formation: a practice that both refines worshippers by undoing their malformed pattern from the world and also kindles anew the flame of God’s love in them for himself, for others, and for his creation. The richly-textured, thick practices of classically-ordered Christian worship not only provide the social imaginary for imagining and desiring life in God’s kingdom, but also are the habit-forming, desire-aiming training for our proper end: the love of God and taking up the vocation of bearing God’s image in all the culture-making realities of our world.⁵³ In worship, human beings are re-called, re-constituted, and re-commissioned by God for that glorious work of being “prince(sses)s and priests charged with cultivating creation.”⁵⁴

Since the “end” of this kind of discipleship is renewed worship, work, and witness, the means matter greatly. Smith considers this a “theology of culture” that “understands human persons as *embodied* actors rather than merely thinking things” and

⁵² Ibid., 136.

⁵³ Smith, *Desiring*, 163.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 164, 206.

“prioritizes *practices* rather than ideas as the site of challenge and resistance.”⁵⁵ For those of us in the local church seeking cultural renewal, this book provides a handle for revising worship and education by auditing our practices for what we need to renounce (or abstain from) and what we might rediscover (or adopt and engage in) from the Great Tradition.⁵⁶ It also changes formation from the habit of inculcating right “knowing” to practicing right “doing/living” to prime one’s loving. Smith points out that the answer cannot simply be an *anticultural* (withdrawing from “culture”) or *acultural* (presuming a “neutral” culture) stance, but intentional formation for rightly-ordered loving and acting in the world. He acknowledges that all “cultural institutions are not ‘created,’ they are ‘sub-created’” as the “fruit of human making” that nevertheless “take on a life of their own” to shape and form the humans that made them to begin with.⁵⁷ Rather than despair over them, we are to hope they might be redirected by kingdom-oriented lives of love.

Smith’s *Imagining the Kingdom* provides the why and how worship works. Smith’s provocative and playful suggestion here is that “the end of worship” is “the *end* of worship:” the sending at the end of a service of worship that rehearses the Christian story is, actually, the proper *telos* of worship, a “being sent from this transformative encounter as God’s witnesses.”⁵⁸ Formation is for mission. The substance of that mission is to live as renewed agents and actors, “empowered by the Spirit to take up once again

⁵⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Desiring*, 209.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Imagining*, 2.

the original vocation of humanity: to be God's image-bearers *by* cultivating all the possibilities latent in God's creation."⁵⁹ It is rightly-ordered cultural labor now flowing from a renewal by God's love and directed for God and his kingdom.⁶⁰

Smith's second volume works on two tracks. First, he builds on his philosophical anthropology by diving deep into the work of the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Smith argues one's body is the locus and basis for action and meaning. It is through our bodies that we see and feel and act in a "world," and we are educated all the time to both perceive and be primed to respond—whether or not that is to see and feel and act rightly.⁶¹ From Merleau-Ponty Smith draws the reality that our "being in the world" creates a "preconscious knowledge," a habitual, bodily know-how somewhere between "*between* instinct and intellect."⁶² Christian "perception" of the world is in this vein, "a visceral 'between' way of meaning the world" that both constitutes the world and calls us to action in it according to salvation history's drama.

Bourdieu's work provides Smith with how the body learns and is shaped by practice and habit. His language of "habitus" connects "habit"—the embodied know-how (the 'practical sense') that is carried in a community of practice"—with the structures, institutions, and community that gathers up whole ways of living and passes it down so

⁵⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁶¹ Smith, *Imagining*, 34-35, 38. Churches constantly underestimate this "know-how" of the body and its "background understanding" of the world while over-selling the conscious functioning of the rational actor.

⁶² Ibid., 43-44, 62.

naturally that it becomes “second nature” to those living in it and living it out.⁶³ The nature of this kind of learning (really, a “conversion”) is practice-based: long-term, communally-formed, preferring actions to concepts, and nearly unconscious. Smith then suggests that “Christian education and formation” really means gaining a “Christian *habitus*” as a way of life primed and prepped for bodily Christian action in the world.⁶⁴ Perhaps the simplest summary of this theoretical work drawing on these two thinkers is Smith’s own: “rituals make the man who makes the world.”⁶⁵

The book’s second act focuses on “how worship works” as Christian perception is shaped by the “incarnate conditions of liturgical formation.”⁶⁶ As Smith’s account of what makes a person values imagination and gives story and narrative pride of place, the “body/story nexus” that is located in practices and habits means every ritual tells a story. Liturgies get central attention when one looks at what kinds of “dramas are enacted and performed” in worship settings.⁶⁷ A person’s Christian action is directly related to the story that has captured her and incorporated her into a *habitus*.⁶⁸ This is literally how worship works: liturgies light up our visionary imaginations and draw us into the practices and habits that “incorporate” us into a community and translate that vision of

⁶³ Ibid., 80-84.

⁶⁴ Smith, *Imagining*, 84.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 123-126.

life into action in the world.⁶⁹ They are training in becoming a certain kind of person who perceives and acts within the story. So Christian worship is a “decentering practice” that calls us out of one world and story and restor(y)s the world as belonging to God.⁷⁰ Smith concludes with the vision of a church that “gather[s] to be sent, and sent to do” the work of cultivating the various spheres of ordinary life in joyful service and to the glory of God. Such a church is a “community of practice” that has recovered and liberated the classic disciplines of worship as formative practices for the ordinary reformation of everyday life. To take up such a sanctifying of our perception (a “restor-y-ing our imagination and understanding” and “restoring rightly-ordered perception”), Smith calls the Church to re-examine and redeem three things that have fallen on hard times: ritual, repetition, and reflection.⁷¹ These are the formative means that the Spirit uses to remake us in the image of Christ.

The critical lesson for the project this paper describes is the link between story and practice. Since practices and habits carry a story in them and intend a particular world, then we in the Church must pay careful attention to the story we tell of the world. We should critically examine our present story telling against the “Story” revealed in Scripture. Second, since story (affectively told and shown) conscripts the imagination, it necessarily incorporates the body by teaching practices that correlate with the story. Practices are not “add-ons,” but story and practice fit properly together and mutually interpret and reinforce each other. Christian formation for discipleship for cultural

⁶⁹ Ibid., 137.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 148-150. The play of the “y” here rather than the expected “e” emphasizes Smith’s point.

⁷¹ Smith, *Imagining*, 160-162, 190.

renewal must dive deep into basic but artful practices that carry the shape of the true story of the world.

In his third and final volume of his *Cultural Liturgies* series, *Awaiting the King*, Smith charts a middle way for public theology between the dangers of an activist transformationalism (which often gets assimilated) and a quietist counter-culture (which often gets marginalized). Smith wants to take a posture where the options are not church or state, but “being a resident alien *and* invested in the state.”⁷² His goal is to move beyond our usual alternatives toward a more reformed, catholic, and public theology for the common good that equips those who work for such an end.

Smith drinks deeply from St. Augustine and Oliver O’Donovan to craft this position, which he describes more as a posture of active waiting “in the meantime of the Saeculum” for anyone who finds herself “a resident alien in some outpost of the earthly city.”⁷³ Smith continues to draw on the philosophical anthropology from the other volumes, now intent on what kinds of “political trajectory” it entails and what it might speak to the “possibilities and limits of human solidarity.”⁷⁴ He wants to apply that not only to “how we imagine and envision political engagement,” but also shift the discussion from defining positions/policies to adopting postures for those practicing such engagement. For Smith, since church and state offer rival views of ultimate ends and

⁷² James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, vol. 3 of *Cultural Liturgies*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), xii.

⁷³ Ibid., xii-xiii. “Saeculum” is his term for “the age between the fall and kingdom come – one that is essentially *permixtum*, an age where the church and world are thrown together intermingled and mixed up in overlapping territory,” 49.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 6.

appropriate means, the modifiers work in either direction: politics (and all public life) is fundamentally religious while the church is also necessarily political. The Christian story of creation will not let us dismiss politics and our Christian hope will not let our politics have the last word.⁷⁵ The real question for Smith is the shape and stance of “‘public’ theology”—“how to live in common with neighbors who don’t believe what we believe, don’t love what we love, don’t hope for what we await.”⁷⁶

He investigates the promise and possibility for Christians when the church’s counter and contribution is not just to the state, but to the market and mall and stadium and any and all other spheres and structures of human community. Smith offers four broad proposals. First, since both the earthly and heavenly cities are “less a *place* and more a *way of life*,” he rehabilitates a sense of Christendom as a “missional endeavor that labors in the hope that our political institutions can be bent, if ever so slightly, toward the coming kingdom of love” (the kingdom of God).⁷⁷ That puts politics and public engagement in their place by refusing their pretension to the ultimate and demand our love via sacrifices of time, energy, and goods. Smith argues for robust engagement with all rivals here since “biblical passion for justice” commits us to “bear witness to—and lobby for—substantive visions of the good *for the sake of* our neighbors.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Awaiting*, 11.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 19, 17.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 34.

Lest his readers be too sanguine about those prospects, Smith next commits to the tension of a twofold recognition: though we live in a social and political order (“late-modern liberal democracy”) that “is at the same time ultimately deficient and disordered” and disordering, we also live in a history and cultural reality already marked by the incarnation and the impact of the gospel.⁷⁹ The former insight comes via Augustine’s doctrine that the redeemed are citizens of the city of God (a community formed by and aimed at the love of God) but constantly among (and in witness to and work for) the citizens captive to the earthly city. Every Christian working for common, public good participates in “cultural systems that are often fundamentally *disordered*.”⁸⁰ She or he does so as one equipped and prepared by and in the (inherently political) worship and discipleship of the church-as *polis*.⁸¹ This requires not assimilation or withdrawal, but “intentionality with respect to the church’s formation for engagement.”⁸²

Their appropriate posture as pilgrims leaves Christians wandering through and constantly mixed up in a world described in that third affirmation: our political and cultural history nevertheless bears the marks of the gospel’s impact.⁸³ Christian worship funds a political imaginary for our action where we see and rehearse the drama of God’s action of coming as the king who saves his covenant people in keeping with his mission

⁷⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Awaiting*, xiii, 43-47. Augustine rejected notion of any dual citizenship: there is only one citizenship for Christians, and it commits them to a resident alienage as voluntary exiles.

⁸¹ Ibid., 55-56, 58.

⁸² Ibid., 56.

⁸³ Ibid., 98.

within our political history. The reign of God in Christ—past, present, and future—“radically refigures” both our concepts and our practices for public engagement.⁸⁴ Smith leans on Kuyper’s view that the church is neither national nor sectarian, but “the church as *institute* should be a ‘city on a hill amid civil society’ *from which* the church as *organism* infiltrates and leavens civil society.”⁸⁵ Preserving this connection means that all our work to name and pursue God’s shalom for the city “is a Christ-haunted call to long for kingdom come.”⁸⁶ When the Church proclaims the gospel and honestly tells the story of liberal democracy with full reference to its Christian roots and influences, it is doing both apologetics and anticipating a need for ongoing critique and discernment.⁸⁷

Finally, it is the power of the gospel at work in our formative worship to help both the scales of assimilation to fall from our eyes and firm up our hearts and hands for a renewed public vocation as agents of new creation: we “actively wait, bearing witness to kingdom come.”⁸⁸ This means taking a “‘long view’ of the relationship between the church and secular government” where the Church holds out the good to the state (and even helps work toward it) while attuned to the work of the Spirit and enabled to discern movement(s) either toward Antichrist or new creation.⁸⁹ The hope is that one’s particular

⁸⁴ Ibid., 66-68, 72, 80.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁸⁶ Smith, *Awaiting*, 89.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 94-95.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 110, 116.

land may become, by God's grace and human effort, in and through the worship and teaching of the church and its members work for the common good, a better country.⁹⁰

In order to “pursu[e] the common good with gospel integrity,”⁹¹ Smith calls the Church to form and foster members sent in mission for the common good of their societies. He offers a set of six tasks for discernment for citizens of heaven on their pilgrim way, sent into this earthly world for renewed cultural labor in light of the gospel's revelation. These read as a set of marching orders for a ministry just such as the one this paper envisions in crafting discipleship that will form people for the messy and mysterious work of cultural renewal. They could easily be embedded in teaching outlines and illustrated with zest from most of the cultural spheres in our world. Smith calls the church (and its leaders in particular) to renew its skill in cultural exegesis and ethnography, both critically of itself and in the unmasking of public idols and cultivating the virtue and skill of heavenly citizenship right in the midst of one's particular city.⁹² When the church does so, its leaders function both as shepherds the gathered church and the church sent in ministry in the spheres of ordinary life.⁹³ The care and cure of souls is not limited to the hour of public worship, but may be extended in structures for sending and exhorting members for lives of public witness to Christ via justice and love.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 117-119.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Smith, *Awaiting*, 191.

⁹³ Ibid., 197-200.

That heavenly citizenship is the prize we have in Christ, and Smith has sharp words for any overly-realized activism that makes the immanent frame the whole picture. It is those on pilgrimage, awaiting their king, who are most able to critique the earthly city and diagnose its disordered loves.⁹⁴ They are well-equipped by the practices of love acquired in their local church's worship (a habit-forming way of life) to take up a renewed call to cultural cultivation and to recognize potential partners in and for the common good of their neighbors.⁹⁵

James Davison's Hunter's *To Change the World* is a kind of socio-cultural parallel to Smith's philosophical work. Hunter's basic thesis is while American Christians are serious about "changing the world" in fulfilling the mandates of creation and culture, they have not been able to because their "dominant ways of thinking about culture and culture change are flawed." Hunter thinks that most contemporary Christian conversation and action with respect to culture suffers from a wrong-headed "theory of culture and cultural change."⁹⁶ Culture is not a matter of what develops from idealism rooted in the hearts and minds of individual, ordinary actors, bubbling from the bottom up and it is not changed by motivating those individuals into mass action or creating new cultural goods.⁹⁷ Instead, "cultural change at its most profound level occurs through dense networks of elites operating in common purpose within institutions at the high-

⁹⁴ Ibid., 213.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 216-221. Smith offers four practical guidelines for action in the public sphere.

⁹⁶ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 274.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 16.

prestige centers of cultural production.”⁹⁸ Failure to grasp this means a history of Christians embracing “strategies that are deeply problematic, shortsighted, and at times, profoundly corrupted” and “that are incapable of bringing about the ends to which they aspire.”⁹⁹

In the middle third of the book, Hunter skewers three of the prominent Christian strategies of cultural change—the conservative Christian Right, the progressive Christian Left, and the Neo-Anabaptists—for their failed approaches to changing the world in carrying out the creation mandate as witness to God. Hunter considers these “political theologies” based on their approach to cultural engagement and their reliance on political power to change the world in God’s (or at least their) image. Rather than looking carefully to Jesus’s mission, they uncritically borrow the means and ends of political power seen in the world. Their public face becomes a “rhetoric of resentment and the ambitions of a will in opposition to others.”¹⁰⁰ The two tasks currently before the church in America now are to “disentangle the life and identity of the church from the life and identity of American society” and “[d]ecouple the ‘public’ from the ‘political’” in an effort to recover an ability to imagine and act within a “wide range of possibilities” for engaging the wider world in responding to the vital challenges of our time.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Ibid., 274. See also 41-45, 76-77, 88. In large part, Hunter considers modern American Christianity as a “weak culture” on the periphery of these networks and institutions with no real capacity or demonstrated ability to “change the world in any significant way.” 89.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰⁰ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 174.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 184-185.

Hunter thinks these traditional (and failed) approaches for cultural change correspond to “defensive against,” “relevance to,” and “purity from.”¹⁰² In contrast, Hunter proposes a new paradigm that is rooted the biblical storyline, the incarnation, and the positions and posture of the early church: “faithful presence within.”¹⁰³ This is the critical contribution of the book. Hunter sees the failed approaches as real attempts to respond to the two challenges of our day: a dissolution of meaning and truth in the structures of belief and the difference wrought by pluralism and an exploding secularity.¹⁰⁴ Both are only adequately addressed by the story and mission of the incarnation of Jesus Christ: in Jesus, God’s true word moves into God’s world and creates a community of visible difference within that world and for that world. Faithful presence in this mode means faithfulness as Christians to God and to one another (both within and without the church), to our tasks in the entirety of life, and within our spheres of influence.¹⁰⁵

Hunter calls the church to a leadership in faithful presence never less than practiced by the individual Christian life, but always so much more: it must develop “overlapping networks in common clause” for faithful presence in the institutions of culture.¹⁰⁶ Precisely because this cannot be a new program or strategy but a “new

¹⁰² Ibid., 213-219.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 237.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 201-210.

¹⁰⁵ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 244-247.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 270.

paradigm of being the church in the late modern world,” it is a long-term effort that requires huge creativity and collaboration.¹⁰⁷ As he writes, Christians must continue affirm “the centrality of the church itself and the parish or local congregation in particular” as the community and institution charged with and equipped for the work of formation.¹⁰⁸ The purposes of this particular project begin with a mode of teaching, modeling, forming, and leading within the local church. It is the place for us to learn, to experiment, and to try to lead in our specifically local context while we worship and share life together. It must eventually move beyond the local church while remaining rooted there, broadening outward, creating networks, establishing partnerships in common cause, and incarnating in reality what Hunter sees as possibility: cooperative efforts for “profound difference in every sphere of life.”¹⁰⁹

This paper borrows the posture of “faithful presence within” from Hunter and builds on it as a paradigm for cultural engagement. It takes up his challenge to make more explicit some of the theological convictions behind that stance and bring it into the teaching of the church. It presses the church to take this work seriously in institutional focus and communal shape and structure and to reimagine the whole of one’s individual and communal life as the sphere of God’s action in Christ by his Spirit. Hunter calls the church to watch its language when it speaks about its relationship with and intentions for the wider culture. He wants it to recognize the post-Christian culture, reject language of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 282.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 271.

“conquest, take-over, or dominion” (whether borrowed from military or business or another source), and recover biblical ways of approaching participation in the work of (renewed) cultural activity.¹¹⁰ The language of this paper and project seeks to develop a healthy culture that can disciple and form men and women for leadership in cultural *renewal*, recognizing that we do not begin from a place other than already *in* the cultural warp and woof of this world.

Structures in Need of Revision

The third section of the literature review examines the strategies on offer for churches determining a discipleship structure and practice that aims at genuine cultural renewal. It begins with Darrell Guder’s argument in *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* that the local church is essential for cultural witness. “Witness” is the fundamental call of the Christian community and the necessary reductionism of the gospel to message, method, or program when evangelization is unhooked from the Christian community as incarnational witness. Drawing on David Bosch, Guder writes that it is the “context of the mission of the church as God’s sent people” that helps inform our reading of Scripture so that Scripture really “equips God’s people for their mission, that is, incarnational witness.”¹¹¹ Taking mission and contemporary western culture seriously means recovering the fundamental character of the church as witness and the whole gospel that is its inheritance and charge.

¹¹⁰ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 280.

¹¹¹ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), x.

Guder first places the message of the gospel in the wider framework of God's gracious action of creation and election and his intentions to save and to heal his creation.¹¹² Doing so allows the church to hold together what has often been separated: both the message of the Kingdom of God and the proclamation of the King of that kingdom. The result is a reading of the New Testament as "a missionary document" for a church "with a specifically missionary character."¹¹³ Following Barth, Guder notes that the witness "word family" (being, doing, and saying witness) reveals that "Christian witness defines the identity of being Christian."¹¹⁴ The church's vocation is to cultivate and form people for this identity with lives that reflect this calling.

The challenge is that such a call is lost in translation. Guder builds on Barth's distinction between genuine Christian faith and religion to survey how the Church has opted for control rather than submission to God's mission. He reviews the history of Church down through Reformation and the current moment to reveal the various ways the gospel call to witness has been compromised on two key fronts. First, in each period, as the Church on mission with its imperative for incarnational witness encountered the need for cultural translation, it inevitably risked some compromise with or even captivity to the host culture. Second, this "risk of translation" meant reduction, where the Church controlled the gospel for its own purposes in mission and ended up with something less than the whole for which God calls it. The biggest rift has been "the dichotomy between

¹¹² Ibid., 32-33.

¹¹³ Ibid., 52.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

the benefits of the gospel and the mission of the gospel.”¹¹⁵ The Church has become primarily about individuals securing salvation and its benefits, while mission moves to an add-on option. A church that has failed to remember that salvation benefits are for the sake of empowerment for witness is a church that has lost its sense of call and reason for transformation of both individual and corporate life.¹¹⁶

The implication of all this (which comprises the latter third of the book) is to call the Church to honest confession of its captivity and repentance for its failure to grasp its calling. Both the local church (as outpost of mission) and the whole wider body of Christ need nothing less than a continual conversion to the mission of God in Christ and the person and Spirit of Christ who calls it forward in faith and faithfulness. Guder unabashedly calls for a wholesale rethinking of ordination, church membership, commissioning, and local church organization while recovering God- and gospel-centered public worship and empowering different avenues for fellowship and mission. The critical shift is to “understand witness incarnationally. The gospel is always to be embodied by the people of God in a particular place.”¹¹⁷ It is only by coming to Jesus Christ again and again that the Church has the power and vision to confront its failures and recover the gospel and the calling of the mission of God. Such a continually converted Church is an actual witness to the world of the reign and rule of Jesus Christ.

Guder’s book yields several implications for ministries of cultural renewal, many of which will be taken up later. First, churches need to recover a bigger story by going all

¹¹⁵ Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 120.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 130.

¹¹⁷ Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 148.

the way back to the beginning of God's gracious action. God has always had a heart for the cultural flourishing of his people in his world. Setting human flourishing in the larger context of God's purposes puts it in proper perspective. It is both the good work God calls humanity to do in creation and also the ordinary sphere of life transformed by Christ's work of redemption and new creation in which we remain as his witness. Second, he writes that "structures of membership need to be transformed into disciplines of sending."¹¹⁸ It is the task of a reformed church leadership to take time and provide space for helping members discern the unique contours of their shared mission in their world and then live it out in practice.

Where Guder calls for the conversion of the Western church at large, Tim Keller's *Center Church* gives a blueprint of that that might look like if a local church commits to "doing balanced, gospel-centered ministry in your city." It offers solid, broad surveys of gospel, church, culture, and ministry and functions like a field guide or road map for local ministry in specific contexts. It is designed to challenge the reader to think biblically, theologically, critically, and contextually about the norms and practices of the gospel in the church, in one's city, and as part of a flourishing movement. The heart of *Center Church* is Keller's instruction for churches to practice deeply gospel-centered ministry in their cities, but its unique contribution is in exposing the need for "theological vision" that occupies the "middle space between doctrine and practice ... where we reflect deeply on our theology and our culture to understand how both of them can shape our ministry."¹¹⁹ That focus on gospel, culture and content create the lanes and guardrails for

¹¹⁸ Guder, 178.

¹¹⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 17.

local ministry expression. The result is a move toward the center as “the place of balance” on three key axes: the nature of the gospel (neither religion nor irreligion), the approach to the city (neither under- nor over-adapted), and the shape of movement (between organized and organic).¹²⁰

The second area where Keller makes a significant contribution to the missional conversation around gospel, church, and culture. Keller is largely sympathetic with the missional church movement (particularly when drawing on Lesslie Newbigin) when it remains focused on God’s mission in Christ by his Spirit and values the contributions of the local church. Keller agrees with missional advocates that the church must seek to undergo a conversion from its own forms of cultural captivity while avoiding the ditches of medievalism (“trying to recreate a Christian society”) or modernism (“withdrawal from society into a the ‘spiritual’ realm”).¹²¹ He calls for a renewal of ministry where the entire church is to be equipped and sent in mission. This will not happen unless the church “trains and encourages its people to be in mission as individuals and as a body... both for evangelistic witness and for public life and vocation.”¹²² It is when the gospel is manifested in their life in community and expressed in public life and vocation that the church is sign to the world of a “*contrast community, a counterculture.*”¹²³

“Centering” the missional church means first recovering the gospel of Jesus Christ at the very center and then differentiating between the organized and organic

¹²⁰ Ibid., 20-22.

¹²¹ Ibid., 255.

¹²² Keller, *Center Church*, 259.

¹²³ Ibid., 260.

forms of the church's work. Two of his applications for church leadership in our world seem most fruitful here for this project. First, Keller affirms "that all Christians are people in mission in every area of their lives." He follows that up with three elements of equipping them for that mission: "1) to be a verbal witness to the gospel in their webs of relationships, 2) to love their neighbors and do justice within their neighborhoods and city, and 3) to integrate their faith with their work in order to engage culture through their vocations."¹²⁴ In contrast to the typical church's mentality that limits the work of its leadership to Word, sacrament, and pastoral care, Keller calls local church leadership to recover a thoughtful, contextual "discipling of the laity for ministry in the world" as the scattered church bearing witness in word and deed.¹²⁵

Second, Keller calls the church to recover an "integrative" ministry on four fronts as required by the gospel and God's word and our changing cultural moment: "connecting people to God (through evangelism and worship) ... to one another (through community and discipleship), to the city (through mercy and justice), ... to the culture (through the integration of faith and work)."¹²⁶ Because of its clear Reformed polity, *Center Church* helpfully articulates that the first two fronts are properly the work of the institutional church and its leadership, but the third front (mercy and justice) is an overlap of church as institution (gathering ministry and programmatic effort under leadership) and organism (through the ministry of ordinary people in their lives).¹²⁷ Keller considers

¹²⁴ Ibid., 272-73.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 277.

¹²⁶ Keller, *Center Church*, 293.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 240-241, 294-295.

the fourth front properly the “every-member ministry” of the organic church alone. Local church leadership (pastors, officers, staff) have a vital role on the first two fronts, but the on-the-ground leadership for the third and fourth front has to come from the laity in the world.¹²⁸ That brought clarity to my personal role in this project (as a pastor) and how to structure and share the equipping for leadership.

JR Woodward’s *Creating a Missional Culture* is a vision for just such equipping. It is part manifesto for and part guidebook to what the contemporary western church might (and can) become under the guidance of the Spirit. Woodward is on a campaign to get church planters and leaders to pay serious attention to the culture of the churches being created. It is not enough to be convinced of a theology of the church sharing in God’s mission, nor to adopt a programmatic effort to change the church and its members toward a missional focus. The key is seeing that theological vision combine with practical structures to embed a missional culture in each church so that it becomes (in Newbigin’s phrase) a fruitful “‘sign, foretaste, and instrument’ by which more of [God’s] kingdom would be realized here on earth.”¹²⁹

For Woodward, culture is best summarized as the web created of “the *language* we live in, the *artifacts* that we make use of, the *rituals* we engage in, our approach to *ethics*, the *institutions* we are part of and the *narratives* we inhabit” that work together “to shape our lives profoundly.”¹³⁰ He notes that failure to grasp the (trans)formational power

¹²⁸ Ibid., 295. They would be “...discipling a community of believers who work as the church organic... inspiring and encouraging its members to go into the various channels of culture.”

¹²⁹ Woodward, *Creating*, 28.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 20, 36-44.

of culture leads to an underestimation of what the Spirit is doing in and through structural and communal life together. As Woodward walks through the cultural web, he spends the most time on close attention a church's rituals (rites, practices and liturgies) and institutions (structures, symbols, and systems) as key places culture is embedded for good or for ill.¹³¹

Woodward sees a church's leadership as both cultural architects and guardians of its key environments where people are cultivated for worship, discipleship, and mission. "Spirit-filled leaders create missional culture" and a new "*approach* to leadership" is necessary to change the ethos of a church community.¹³² He names five key environments—learning, healing, welcoming, liberating, and thriving—that bring the ministry of the church to full expression.¹³³ He thinks that God by his Spirit has gifted the church with apostles, prophets, evangelists, prophets, and teachers for this very task: being equippers for the ministry (priesthood) of all believers in the local church and their maturity in Christ (Eph 4).¹³⁴ Woodward grounds his leadership decisions in Scripture and modern movements to describe and advocate for a Spirit-gifted, polycentric model of local leadership as a theological sign to the church and statement to the world.¹³⁵ His abiding concern is to emulate the manner of ministry he sees in Jesus and the New

¹³¹ Ibid., 38-42.

¹³² Ibid., 33.

¹³³ Ibid., 36-54.

¹³⁴ Woodward, *Creating*, 58-60, 120-121.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 60-61, 75, 92, 96.

Testament, adapted for our time and culture, to enable the emotional and communal health of the leaders and the community they seek to serve, equip, and empower as ministers.¹³⁶

A central portion of the book is dedicated to explicating the five-fold roles and gifts, demonstrating them in Jesus life and going on to name each gift's role, "focal concern" (chief work), the end toward which it works, and the "marks" by which it might be seen.¹³⁷ Though all are gifted, some are developed enough to be discovered and designated "equippers:" leaders for the small- to mid-size *discipleship* (or *missional communities* who help establish their rhythms and set their annual vision and focus. These communities are the basic unit of the church existing between gathering for public worship or scattering to minister in communal or personal missional spaces.¹³⁸ The remainder of the book concerns the leadership for these groups, and he concludes with some hard-won lessons on the practicality and pitfalls of identifying, developing, and implementing this kind of Spirit-led, polycentric congregational leadership.

I serve as a "teaching elder" in a Presbyterian tradition that has typically called us "pastors" or "ministers" and designated our work more as pastors, teachers, and evangelists to the exclusion of apostleship or prophecy.¹³⁹ While I remain committed to the understanding and practices of the biblical offices (elder and deacon) in the Reformed

¹³⁶ Ibid., 114

¹³⁷ Ibid., 121-166.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 173.

¹³⁹ Evangelical Presbyterian Church, "Book of Government," July 2018, 9-5, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://epc.org/wp-content/uploads/Files/4-Resources/5-Downloadable-EPC-Resources/A-Constitution-Doctrine/BookOfOrder2018-2019update20190402.pdf>.

tradition, Woodward’s explanation of the gifts (and corresponding systems and structures for missional culture) seem largely in line with—and strangely liberating for—our polity and practice. His schema could go a long way on the ground in our churches to get us out of a clericalism and into the work of identifying gifts and developing them for the proper ministry of the whole body.¹⁴⁰ It is these kinds of people—alive to Christ, to those around them, and to the work of their entire life that participates in Christ’s renewal of all things, and equipped for that leadership—who this project seeks to grow under the guidance of the Spirit within the environments of our church. As it is, we at Signal Pres consistently struggle against a toxic blend of traditional ministry (where the clergy and officers serve the people of the parish) mashed up with a market-driven, consumer culture (where the people have heightened expectations and demands). The regrettable casualty is the actual equipping of the church for its scattered mission. When a community that should bear fruit remains immature, people go without the gospel in the world and the work of culture creation goes on unleavened by the gospel.

Kyle David Bennett’s book *Practices of Love* is a short “Christian philosophy of public affairs” via practical teaching on the spiritual disciplines.¹⁴¹ Bennett knows that disciplines are both much beloved and much maligned, so he delivers a “framework” for them that shows “how they are related and central to God’s story of creation, redemption, and renewal and to our participation in it.”¹⁴² He repeatedly places the disciplines within

¹⁴⁰ Congregations would then discern and call out from among them those “equippers” as the men and women the Lord is leading to serve and shepherd the overall body of his church by ordained office.

¹⁴¹ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, xv.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, xiv.

the Father's calling and commands, the Son's commandments and commissioning, and the Spirit's "convicting us and creating us" in the likeness of Christ our King.¹⁴³ The location for this Trinitarian work that calls for our full participation is simply our ordinary life with our families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers in this world.

The bulk of the book is a manual for teaching and practice. *Practices of Love* recalls the roots of spiritual disciplines in the communal life of the early monks. Drawing on the history and practice of John Cassian, Bennett reminds us that their goal was to adopt "certain rules and practices to help them fix the malformed way that they do daily activities ... not to escape the world but to enact a different one."¹⁴⁴ As such, we receive them as the Spirit-given ways we reorient and offer our daily deeds to the Father under the reign of Jesus our King. Bennett traces out the shape of eight practices that function as bodily habits that correct us and retrain us to live lives of love. They are not ascetic practices (in the pejorative sense) that provide an individual, emotional high or polish the soul-ish nature of humans at the expense of the health of the body, but earthy practices that help us inhabit our truly human, God-created bodies. Bennett's pattern is to take each classic discipline and reveal its horizontal dimension by "flipping it on its side:" see it in a new light by connecting it to a domain of ordinary life in God's creation and contrasting it with the malformed way we are accustomed to living. Sabbath reveals people are created for rest but distort it with laziness, service shows the fundamentals of work as opposed to sinful negligence or competitiveness, and so on. They become "renewed ways

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

of doing” ordinary life that enable believers to “love our neighbor in the most basic and fundamental things we do.”¹⁴⁵

For Bennett, practicing disciples this way (as living and loving) participates in Jesus’ own renewal of his creation by his Spirit. Beyond the level of the individual life, he is quite interested in how they “renew distorted cultural practices in society.”¹⁴⁶ He wants to press past a mistrustful private/public distinction and reveal that “changed personal practices have professional and political import.”¹⁴⁷ The personal is not opposed to the communal and public: it cannot help but impact the interpersonal and may be both cause and effect of communal practice. Disciplines are not vehicles for cultural withdrawal, but rather the very fibers of renewed cultural practices from which we weave the fabric of a new communal engagement. They are “concrete and essential ways that God renews and revitalizes our lives and our life in society with others...” by putting us to work as “agents of repair who are on a mission with God to fix the breach in the created order (Is 58:12).”¹⁴⁸

My concern is that though he charts a path for such action and beautifully portrays the need for individual lives of love and justice as God’s renewed people, it remains so easy to still see the individual as the primary actor. Perhaps that is simply the difficulty brought on by the selfishness of sin that curves us in on ourselves and the hyper-individualism of our cultural moment. What we seem to lack in the local church (and

¹⁴⁵ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 26, xiv.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 168.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 170.

¹⁴⁸ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 171-172.

maybe even resist) is a communal program for teaching and training in these practices and a resolve to order our communal life by them. Bennett has something to offer to both Hunter and Levin here. To Hunter's indictment of the Christian left and right for reaching for policy solutions or trying to change individual hearts and minds and Levin's repudiation of the either/or options of a progressive program of national identity or a retreat into individual rights, Bennett labors for a layer of life together that both shapes and liberates individual lives and yet is embedded in a community that equips to make a difference.. As Levin acknowledges, this middle layer comes in a handful of basic clusters of life necessary for society and civilization: the "mediating structures" of subsidiarity of the family, education, government, work, communal institutions, and religious communities.

In the Kingdom of God, it is the local church that serve as that fundamental community, and the promises we make to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ are vows to practice renewed living under Jesus our King. Bennett's practices of love are ripe for teaching and implementing by the gathered church in its ministry of discipling and connecting people to God and one another, but must be expressed individually and locally at the most basic of levels of the scattered church: among a family, a small group, with a close friends, etc. This tension of teaching-doing or training-practicing is unavoidable and calls for careful instruction and accountability. It also calls for a gracious individual flexibility in real life practice, as the eight disciplines must necessarily be tailored to real people with real schedules and amidst real relationships in this world. But the both/and of communal and individual practice must be maintained as necessary poles that require each other. Perhaps a recovery of such "practices of love"

may cultivate an ecclesial community that is just as vibrant in both its gathering (to worship, teach, and equip) and its sending to scatter as leaven in the world (to live, love, serve, order, work, play, and rest). In this manner, the church would shine as an alternative *polis*, an altogether-different new kingdom and new creation set up right in the midst of the old one as an outpost of Spirit-poured-out love and life in the world.

CHAPTER 3:

RETELLING THE STORY AND RECOVERING A CALLING

Chapter three will explore the shape of discipleship with respect to the work of cultural renewal. Four things seem most necessary for this work: story, calling, practice, and structure. “Retelling the Story” unpacks the reality that the biblical narrative covers creation and culture from beginning to end and reveals that the gospel is the key to bringing a whole-life focus to both. The second half of this chapter, “Recovering a Calling,” examines four critical moments in Scripture that prepare and call the church into a posture of voluntary exile as the faithful presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Retelling the Story: A Gospel for Cultural Renewal

Discipleship for cultural renewal begins with getting the story straight. It is first rooted in the classic four-act story of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. This allows the focus to be “controlled by all the biblical teaching *all the time*”¹ and marks the entirety of human life—both creational and cultural—as the sphere of God’s redemption.²

¹ Keller, *Center Church*, 230.

² Ibid., 226-230.

It also lays the groundwork for facing down dualistic and legalistic Christianity and facing up to a life- and world-view deeply formed by faith for practice.³

Creation and Fall

The story begins with the Creator and his creation. Hebrews 11:3 makes it clear that God is the creator of heaven and earth, and of all things seen and unseen. God's word makes God's world and anchors both our understanding of it and our place and purpose within it. In the creation account in Genesis 1-4, God reveals both the structure and direction of his creation and of humanity as his representatives within it. It is essential to recover a non-reductive version of this story that includes the entirety of God's creation (including human culture) and pays attention to both the individual human heart and the essential relatedness of the whole.

First, there is a structure to God's creational work as he both forms and fills his world.⁴ Drawing on Bruce Waltke's literary analysis of the two three-day triads in Genesis 1, we see God forming something formless and then filling the emptiness.⁵ In the first triad (Gn 1:3-13), God speaks his "let there be" to frame out spheres and domains (e.g. separating "light from dark"). God shapes, elaborates on, and furnishes his world the way he wants to.⁶ In the second triad (days four through six, 1:14-31), God fills his

³ Ibid., 331.

⁴ The language of "structure" and "direction" (used here and throughout) is found in Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics For a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 10-11.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 57-58.

⁶ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 22-23.

creation and promotes its flourishing. God's "let there be" on these days sparks and promotes the filling of his formed creation with new realities such as "lights in the expanse of the sky"—sun, moon, and stars (1:14-17). God seems to delight in the diversity and variety of his creation. In Richard Mouw's words, the "Creator deliberately wove many-ness into the very fabric of creation" and this many-ness "was necessary for created life to flourish in a 'fresh and vigorous' manner."⁷ The multiplication of life "after its kind" is further evidence of the Lord's will and delight, as each of the six days of making concludes with an "and it was good" statement. It is only on the sixth and final day following all the filling that God doubles his pronouncement: "good good"—which means very good (1:31). This statement underscores the power and constancy of God's word that expresses his will (Is 55:10).⁸

The creation narrative's penultimate moment (before God's rest) is God's making and commissioning of human beings. God forms them in his image on the sixth day and places them in his creation to be his representatives and exercise a measure of rule over creation (Gn 1:26-30). There is a structure present again in God's creating: the making-charging of humanity in 1:26-28 and 2:5-25 parallels God's forming-filling of the natural creation in Genesis 1. In making human beings, God declares them made "in our image, after our likeness" (1:26-27) and gifts them with the breath of life (2:7). Next God calls for both their fruitfulness and their faithfulness by charging them with multiplying and

⁷ Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 17-18.

⁸ Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 45.

ruling over the life of the earth (1:26, 28), naming God's world (2:8, 19-20), and working it and caring for it (2:15-18). God differentiated humans into male and female (1:27 and 2:20-25) for a biological fruitfulness of increasing in number and filling the earth. Human beings also echo God's "forming and filling" of creation by the steward-like dominion they are to exercise. That task is filled out first in "working" (or "tilling/cultivating") God's creation by activities of development. The second side of the human task is to "care" for (or "keep") God's creation through the preservation of the garden as part of the whole economy of creation.⁹ Forming and filling also include the work of human culture-making as the "fruit" of human interaction with the world.¹⁰

Both the entirety of the physical creation and the unfolding of the human identity and task reveal a direction present in God's creative action. This trajectory entails worship and faithfulness to God, for all creation belongs to and is oriented toward God. God intends for and commands his creation to flourish according to his wisdom, justice, peace, and love.¹¹ God provides for its orderly procession, division and distinctions, formation and filling, provision and protection (Ps 104). God is at work by his providence among all things for their continual renewal (Ps 104:30; Col 1:15-17). God's creation is for his praise (Is 55:12; Ps 90:8, 148) and is meant to be "filled with the knowledge of the

⁹ Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 55-59.

¹⁰ Ibid., 52-56.

¹¹ Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 10-11.

glory of God” (Hb 2:14).¹² As Walsh and Middleton write, “creation is going somewhere” in that its development and preservation—both by God and by his human beings—have always been an intended part of its flourishing.¹³ This biological and cultural work for human beings is part of God’s creational mandate. This stewardship is a type of “responsible development” that aligns with God’s norms and serves to “[open up] creation through the historical process” of human beings’ ongoing life in relationship with God and God’s world.¹⁴

The purposeful tasks assigned to humanity of multiplying and ruling, working and caring are key clues to God’s direction for his entire creation. There is “an intended analogy between the limited authority over the earth that humans enjoy and the ultimate sovereignty over it of YHWH God. The former is portrayed as a reflection or likeness of the latter.”¹⁵ As creatures, human beings are part of God’s created order. But as stewards, representatives, and “vice-regents” who are entrusted with the “wise and loving care of and provision for all God’s creation,” they may not transcend the limits set by their Creator nor disrespect his creation.

Genesis 3-4 moves the narrative of the biblical story from Act 1 of creation into Act 2 of the fall. Whereas the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2 reveal the delight of a Trinitarian God (1:27-2:3) of persons-in-communion in dynamic relationship with who

¹² This paragraph and the previous one are adapted from Andrew Cornett, “Post-Seminar Assignment On a Ministry of Cultural Renewal” (class paper for ET723, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016), 3.

¹³ Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 57.

¹⁴ Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 44, 46.

¹⁵ Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 54.

and what God has made, the transgression of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 mars all of what God has made. As Eve and Adam are deceived by the serpent's words into believing that God's world-making word is not to be trusted (3:1-5), they obey their own desires and take their provision into their own hands. This cataclysmic shift introduces sin: a refusal to believe God, a rejection of the Lordship of God, and as rebellion against the command of God. The consequences are a now-broken relationship between the Creator, his creatures, and his created order.

The communion and shalom imaged-forth at the heart of creation becomes like a fractured mirror. In the midst of sin and its ensuing consequences, the God-ward direction of creation is bent and broken while the structure remains fundamentally intact.¹⁶ Instead of faithfully reflecting God's image to his creation, Eve and Adam turn away from trusting God and turn in on themselves. In shame they turn to the work of their own hands for provision and away from the presence and person of God (3:6-7).

This original sin ripples down through the essential relatedness of all creation. Humanity's relationship with God, with one another, with God's creatures, and with all of God's creation is marked and marred by sin. It manifests as a brokenness and distortion in their relationships, culture, and vocation. Hiding, blaming, sorrow, pain, anger, violence, vengeance, and murder comprise the downward spiral of Genesis 3-6. The consequences of the curse strike at the human vocation such that their work, while essentially good, becomes painful: toil marked by "thorns and thistles" (3:18) and

¹⁶ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 46, 54-55.

occasionally by deep alienation and meaninglessness.¹⁷ Finally, every aspect of primitive cultural development (Gn 1:28-4:26) is tinged with individual and systemic failure when it diverts from glorifying God toward personal glory, greed, or a governance of lording over rather than lovingly serving.¹⁸ The original temptation to be like God (Gn 3:5) flowers into a full-scale rejection of God by humanity: in resistance to the command to multiply and fill the earth, they concentrate their population and devote their culture to elevating their own name (Gn 11:4).

This distortion and mis-direction now present in creation works its corrupting influence through everything God has made. The Reformed doctrine of “total depravity” reflects this by stating that there is no aspect of early creation untouched by sin and its disastrous effects. That is not to say humanity lives in the worst of all possible worlds or that the entirety of creation is beyond salvage or rescue. But whether one considers arts or athletics, business or education, the family or the state, every domain of life is corrupted by the invasive root of sin at an individual, communal, and institutional level.¹⁹ As Wolters writes, “all evil and perversity in the world is ultimately the result of humanity’s fall, of its refusal to live according to the good ordinances of God’s creation.”²⁰

The Lord of All Creation

From beginning to end, the storyline of Scripture reveals a world belonging to

¹⁷ On the latter, see Keller and Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor*, 82.

¹⁸ Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 56-57.

¹⁹ Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 56-57.

²⁰ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 55.

God. The statement “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world and all those who dwell therein” (Ps 24:1) is a declaration that rings throughout Scripture the clear note of God’s sovereignty over his creation. All things are from, for, through, and to him (Rom 11:33-36).

Colossians 1:13-29 reveals and expounds upon the supremacy of Christ, a consistent thread throughout the creation, redemption, and restoration of all things. First, Christ’s lordship gives us the whole story and prevents a reductionism of the gospel story down to one saving moment or matrix. The gospel is certainly an individual “God-and-me” story at the existential level where God redeems our lives from sin and death, in Christ, for himself (Col 1:13-14,21-23), and redirects our hearts to himself and toward our neighbors. It is also a communal “God-and-us” story that creates a church who bears witness to Jesus and his good news in word and deed, message and ministry (1:25-27). Ultimately, it is also a cosmic “God-and-all creation” story where God’s beloved community, made in his image and now renewed in the image of Christ (Col 1:15, 3:10), resumes faithful rule with God in a fully-restored creation (Rv 21:5). This story has a missional impulse for it is the true story of the whole world, and though all things are reconciled to Christ they at present not all serving him (Heb 2:8-9). God does not remove himself from his creation due to its sin and curse but instead persists with it and provides for its redemption.

Second, Jesus Christ is Lord over the whole creation. All things in every sphere of reality were created by, through, and for him (Col 1:16). Christ is pre-existent (“before all things”), currently reigning (“in him all things hold together,” 1:17), and is the beginning of the new, restored creation (“firstborn from the dead,” 1:18). Abraham Kuyper

famously emphasized that the entirety of creation belongs to God: “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry ‘Mine!’”²¹ God’s sovereignty rightly extends to the whole of creation, whether the stuff of biology, chemistry, and physics or every facet of human culture. As Lord of all creation, Jesus lifts the curse and renders every square inch an opportunity for cooperative witness to his redemption—whether race or class, politics or economics, family or friends, beauty or utility.

The responsible development of creation under the lordship of Christ necessitates the developing and preserving of cultural life in the direction of flourishing before God. There is both a divine and human side to this work. Christians understand “common grace” to be the means by which God’s Spirit is engaged in human beings’ ordinary, ongoing existence. Following John Calvin, Kuyper wrote that “common grace” is the grace “by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammelled development of our life in which to glorify himself as Creator.”²² The Spirit animates and preserves all life, restrains sin and so keeps creation from chaos, and brings creation to its perfection.²³ Vincent Bacote describes how this comes through human efforts: “though the Spirit enables development, the hands of humans are needed to till the garden of creation and

²¹ Quoted in Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 4.

²² Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: Six Lectures from the Stone Foundation Lectures Delivered at Princeton University* (1899; repr. ReadAClassic, 2010), 19. See also Vincent Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 97, 114.

²³ Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology*, 113-114.

yield the fruits of social development that comprise history.”²⁴ It is human beings who undertake the preservation and development of God’s creation. The question is whether they will take it in the direction of sin or of grace, for the glory of self or of God.

Third, Jesus’ lordship reveals the reality of the struggle where Christ’s grace in redemption meets sinful human intention and action throughout the whole world.

“Antithesis” is the term theologians have given to the reality of creation’s structural goodness but directional sinfulness. The radical effects of sin are such that every square inch of creation is contested ground. Though created, claimed, and reconciled by Christ, creation and culture remain a realm of struggle as redemption is applied and both are being restored under the gracious rule of the King. Christians must take care not to “paper over” this distinction and affirm “the world” in all “its distorted, misdirected configurations.”²⁵ They must resist such realities and reaffirm in each day that Christ has disarmed and triumphed over all misdirected powers (Col 2:8, 15).

One consequence of this “re-story-ed faith” is that the two dominant dualisms of the modern world are revealed to be baseless. First, there can no genuine split between the “sacred” and the “secular” where sacred refers only to God’s space or things “spiritual” and proper to God and secular means temporal or earthly and proper to the physical world humanity inhabits.²⁶ For if it is the will of God for his glory to fill the earth and if the Son of God is Lord over all creation, then creation cannot be separated

²⁴ Ibid., 121.

²⁵ Smith, *Desiring*, 190.

²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2. This maps on to the first meaning of “secular” that Taylor describes in terms of space and sphere.

into a physical realm of biological, chemical, mechanical and a spiritual realm of heart, mind, or soul. Nor can it be separated into a sphere for religion or the Church hived off from those of the state, family, arts, economics, and the like. God's relational norms, law, cultural mandate, and sovereignty operate within a world that fully belongs to him.

Second, the long-standing assumption that "public" and "private" are two distinct and separate spheres of value does not hold. The public/private split stemmed from an enlightenment dualism between fact and value that pitted the "necessary" truths of reason over against the "accidental" stuff of history.²⁷ Over time, the public square became a place of procedural secularism that gave no room for private religious convictions.²⁸ This created a split identity for a Christian where he or she lived with as Christ as Lord in the personal piety of heart or home but did not recognize or deny that Lordship in the public realms of life and work. But there is only life the church is called to live, and that is the ordinary, human, everyday life lived as renewed in Jesus Christ and offered to him in worship (Rom 12:1-2).

To erase these dualisms requires bringing back a vigorous retelling of the story of God's place and God's work in the wider world. The secular nature of our current age and world, which entails a kind of general "spiritual instability" with a myriad of options for belief or unbelief, places people under intense pressure to ask questions and

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 35-37.

²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2. This application of the public/private place plays quite well with the second popular understanding of "secular" that Taylor cites: an "emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres." Note also that neither of these two senses of "secular" are the primary meaning and thrust of Taylor's book. See also James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 20-21.

consider options.²⁹ It is in this world that the church is scattered to be freely about its cultural work glorifying God and administering God's grace in its various forms by loving, providing for, and serving its neighbors. The gospel story revealed in Colossians urges its readers to take up their work as worship and service offered to God (3:17). It explicitly applies to the family, marriage, and economic relationships such that all work is to be done "for the Lord" in service to Christ (3:23-24). It is a new creation call to cultural work and care right in the midst of and in witness to the old creation and culture.

The Church in Christ and in the World

The scattered presence of the church in the world is an echo of the Trinitarian reality at the heart of creation and redemption. The ultimate moment in creation is not the flowering of humanity: it is God's surveying all he has made, declaring it "very good," and entering the blessed rest of the seventh day (Gn 1:31-2:3). This delight of a Trinitarian God in relationship to his creation is the overflowing love of persons-in-communion creating beauty and communion.³⁰ Human beings participate in the goodness of God's creation by playing various parts with each other and with the wider world in communion and cooperation with him.

In this they participate in God and reflect God's intention from the beginning. God's creational intention is restored and advanced by the work of salvation. As Jesus says of his "own" (the church given to him by the Father) in his high-priestly prayer, he

²⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

³⁰ James Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996), 40. There is a correspondence to human vocation within creation: community and beauty are not subsumed under utility.

made the Father's name known to them that they might believe the Father has sent the Son (Jn 17:6-8). He links those words with his prayer for the church across place and time: "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (17:21). He has given them the Father's glory for that same union (17:22).

The restored humanity of the church means that God's people enjoy a union and communion in Christ in the Father that is directly connected to his mission: "so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21, 23). The church's mission is directly parallel with Christ's own mission: as Jesus prayed "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (17:18), he repeats the formula in sending the church after his resurrection (20:21). In an echo of Genesis 2, he "breathes" on them and says to them "receive the Holy Spirit" (20:22). This is a recommissioning of humanity in both identity and vocation; they have been rescued from sin and restored to manifest the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ in all things.

All mission and ministry necessarily participate in the single mission and ministry of Christ by his Spirit. Therefore, the church has neither a mission (or missions) nor ministry (or ministries), but rather is Christ's mission to the world and ministry in the world.³¹ The church must recover its position of where it is in the whole story of redemptive history. It is a provisional body: a penultimate "now" in light of an ultimate "not yet." By participating in Christ's own life and ministry, the church anticipates the renewal and restoration of all things.

³¹ Torrance, *Worship*, 130-137.

Therefore as Jesus has been in the world, he leaves his church in the world in the presence and the power of the Spirit; and just as he is not of the world, neither are his people of the world any longer (Jn 17:6, 11, 14-16). Thoughtful discipleship wrestles with Scripture's presentation of the "world" in two different senses of the term. In one sense, "world" is the object and substance of creation in time and place. In the other, "world" is the principalities and powers, structures and systems, and patterns of human culture-making which have been tarnished by sin and exist under the dominion of death and devil.³² It is important to clarify that the church's identity ("in" and belonging to Christ) has been taken out of the world in the second sense (no longer "of" or "belonging to" a mis-directed order enslaved to sin, death, and the devil) yet remains *in* the world in the first sense (this actual cosmos of God's good design). To clarify the church's vocation, Christ's mission for his church is to be at work in the world (this physical world, God's good design) for the sake of the world in the second sense (the creation groaning and still suffering the effect of sin and dominion of darkness).

A Trinitarian view of cultural renewal holds on to both poles: the church in Christ (but not of the world) and the churches in the world for the sake of the good-but-fallen world. The overflowing life of God is now available and manifest in the lives of his people—a united, new humanity now scattered throughout his creation. Since the focus of God's redemption is the good-but-fallen creation and the locus of redemption is the entirety of that creation, the implications for cultural renewal are just as vast. Michael

³² Smith, *Desiring*, 188-189. Wolters clarifies how mistaking these senses leads to false understanding of structure/direction and a consequent sacred/secular divide that undercuts both the nature of the problem and the scope of God's redemption. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 63-67.

Goheen notes that as Christ's Lordship is comprehensive, so is the scope of his mission through his church to show that "Jesus rules again over marriage and family, business and politics, art and athletics, leisure and scholarship, sex and technology."³³ Cultural renewal is fundamentally witness in one's location and through one's vocation. Members of the church are scattered as "salt, light, and leaven" among the world. In their ordinary ways of working, relating, and loving, they are called to meet others, present Christ, and call on them to receive him and become his witnesses.³⁴ As the church continually rediscovers the call to "all the world," it must include "all of life" within "all the world" to avoid what Guder calls further reductionism of the gospel to alternative routes of self-salvation.³⁵

The "End" of New Creation: Revelation 21-22

The life God is interested in always extends from creation to the "end" of new creation. As Guder noted, it is not to be reduced to either a progressive mission (to bring the kingdom without sharing life in the King) or a static set of benefits (a story circumscribed by fall and cross into a problem neatly solved). The new creation wrought in Jesus Christ and manifest in his people by his Spirit is not a return to the garden of Eden but a move to the city of the New Jerusalem. To say that the new creation is the "end" of the old creation is not only to point to a last chapter in a chronological narrative,

³³ Michael W. Goheen, postscript to *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview*, Albert M. Wolters, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 130.

³⁴ Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 82.

³⁵ Ibid., 76-77, 127. Guder names these as "individual benefits" (on the right) or "social progress" (on the left).

but also to argue for it as the *telos* of completion of the original creation. When Scripture speaks of “the age to come,” “the last day,” or “the end of the ages,” it is referring to the time of Christ’s second coming—both as a moment yet to come in historical development and a consummation of a promised reality and relationship.³⁶

Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21-22 are deeply related witnesses to the reality of the new creation which is to come in Christ. “New creation” carries the dual biblical meaning of a restoration of original creation (liberated from bondage) and a brand-new reality introduced into the old (hinted at 2 Cor 5:17 and Rv 21:5). The Scriptures here paint images in words that give warrant for belief in creation’s fulfillment rather than its annihilation or assimilation into spirit. Revelation promises that earth and heaven will be joined together in the new city God brings down to earth (Rv 21:1-3). In this renewed world, the promise of the prophets will come to pass as “the whole earth will be filled with the glory of God” (Hb 2:14) in the coming-together of God and his image-bearers in his creation: groom and bride in perfect union, reconciled in Jesus Christ. As Earl Palmer notes, even the new city has an old name (Jerusalem) and the destiny of creation is not absorption or oblivion, but completion.³⁷ All the elements in the description—river and mountains, trees and fruit, people and kings, distances and doorways—convey a measure of continuity with our world.

Revelation presents a culturally-rich new Jerusalem full to the brim in two ways. First, the “nations will walk” by its light and the “kings of the earth” are pictured as

³⁶ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 20-22.

³⁷ Earl F. Palmer, *1, 2, 3 John, Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Communicator’s Commentary Series*, ed. Lloyd John Ogilvie, (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 240.

bringing into it “the glory and honor of the nations” (Rv 21:24, 26). There is a glorious cultural diversity present via nations and languages, tribes and tongues. God’s house is full; the missional impulse of God’s covenant people called to be a light to the nations has been carried to completion. Those nations benefit from the now-fulfilled covenant promise of God.³⁸ Second, the new Jerusalem is replete with the treasures of human cultures seen in the “glory” of the kings and their national cultures. The new creation seems to include the fruits of human creativity and culture that are in direct continuity with God’s creational and cultural mandate.

Revelation reveals that all has been made new by the Lord through a “reformation” rather than a “restitution” of the old.³⁹ History has a trajectory, and salvation history reveals it in particular. Anthony Hoekema refers to the “newness” pictured here in the new creation as a newness not of time or origin, but of nature or quality.⁴⁰ In his survey of the prophetic picture in Isaiah 60, Richard Mouw points out that neither the peoples nor their goods and treasures come into the new earth “as is;” God has judged them and transformed them by “bringing low” their “rebellious uses” and “idolatrous functions” and subduing them to serve his purpose and his glory.⁴¹ The biblical descriptions of the “passing away” of the first heavens and earth (Rv 21:1) is better understood as a fiery judgment resulting in purification and cleansing rather than

³⁸ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 137.

³⁹ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 78.

⁴⁰ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 280.

⁴¹ Mouw, *When The Kings Come Marching In*, 29-32, 40.

outright destruction, much as the furnace refines precious metal.⁴² All work accomplished for pride, art created for self-glory, wealth produced for security, relationships cultivated for lordship, and power accumulated for dominance will be judged and cleansed. The crooked will be made straight and redirected for the glory of the Lord. In the end, Christ exerts his lordship to say “No!” to sin and its effects by judging, condemning, and undoing them on the cross and in the final judgement. He even applies the leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations (Rv 22:2). The new heavens and new earth are not “another” world; they are this world, finally subject to, renewed by, and redirected for the glory of Christ.⁴³

Recovering a Calling: A Posture of Faithful Presence in Voluntary Exile

A renewed telling of the biblical story helps the church begin recover an old posture for a new day: voluntary exile. This ancient-future stance commits the church to be the “faithful presence” of Jesus Christ in the world, among the world, for the good of the world and the glory of God. It helps the church in the late-modern west to be consciously aimed at the right ends of loving God, loving neighbor, and working for renewal. Three biblical passages and two critical insights—voluntary exile and faithful presence—combine to provide the background for a recovered calling for the church.

⁴² Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 280-281, 284.

⁴³ Edward Thurneysen, *From Christus and Zukunft* in *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 1931, trans. J. A. Schweppe in *The Nature of the Resurrection Body*, 218-219. Quoted in Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 281.

Jeremiah 29: Forced Exile and the Good of the City

In the Old Testament, God allowed his people to go through the profound disorientation of forceable exile in consequence for breaking his covenant. God used this severe mercy to reorient them to God's heart and God's purposes for them in their world.⁴⁴ In Jeremiah 29, God's people of Judah find their kingdom broken apart and their community hauled off to live in exile in Babylon. It is here, in a foreign land among foreign gods, that not only do they learn to sing again, but their lives are redirected in service to God, their neighbors, and their city. When their longings (fed by false prophets) shouted the plea of hurrying to leave for home, God called them to stay in the city and seek its prosperity. They are re-created to be "a new alternative community" and give birth to a "new public reality."⁴⁵

God's word to the exiles comes with two imperatives: develop a "sustained communal life" and then "work for the well-being (*shalom*) of the empire and its capital city."⁴⁶ These commands are accompanied by a radical promise of God in the first person: at the right time, "I will restore ... and I will bring you back" (Jer 29:14).⁴⁷ God's purposes include a homecoming for his people. But in the meantime of exile, Judah is to relinquish their desire and plans to leave and instead press forward where they are, obedient to God's mission through their civic responsibilities. The work of building,

⁴⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 3. Covenant and sovereignty are the shaping realities for Israel's experience.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 256.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 259-260.

settling, cultivating, eating the produce, marrying, and having children (29:5-6) becomes the means of “promoting the welfare of the city” (29:6) to which they are sent. The welfare of God’s people is directly tied to the welfare of their neighbors. As they work out the task of shalom for their neighbors, they live in light of the promised gift of shalom to them in the future (Jer 29:5, 11).⁴⁸

James Davison Hunter’s proposed paradigm of cultural engagement—“faithful presence within”—derives from the biblical story as well as the person of Jesus and the practices of the church. The posture of “faithful presence” he describes commits Christians to faithfulness in four dimensions: to God, to one another (both within and outside of the church), to one’s tasks in the entirety of life, and within one’s sphere(s) of influence.⁴⁹ The “faithfulness” in this posture enables the scattered church to embody the kingdom of God, enacting God’s word by loving God and others through a whole-life, obedient embrace of the creation and culture mandates. The “presence” of the posture takes its context of time and place seriously, seeking to embody God’s peace as a witness for the flourishing of its neighbors, community, and world in a time of dissolution and displacement.

To support his case, Hunter reaches back to Jeremiah 29 where Judah is in exile and God commits his people to “faithful presence” first in this situation of forced exile. The lesson of exile for Judah was not that they were seemingly abandoned by God, but

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 259.

⁴⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 244-247.

that their “exile was the place where God was at work.”⁵⁰ Faithful presence is a middle way between alternatives of over-accommodating and assimilating or retreating and going home (literally or metaphorically by withdrawal). God was “calling them to maintain their distinctiveness as a community but in ways that served the common good.”⁵¹ God’s faithfulness to them and his ultimate purpose for them is not deterred by their cultural situation.

1 Peter: Voluntary Exile and the Good of One’s Neighbors

The New Testament further builds on God’s call to faithful presence by introducing the church to another kind of exile. First Peter presents a portrait of the church that is in voluntary exile because of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and is committed to the good of its neighbors. Peter begins by addressing God’s chosen people, his elect, as “exiles of the dispersion” throughout the region of Asia Minor (1 Pt 1:1). Their location and situation did not come as a surprise to God, but was “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ” (1:2). God has placed his people in these ordinary lives, scattered throughout the world during this time of exile, so that they might be his witnesses through lives set apart through conduct fitting the holiness of the Lord (1:15-17). The author explicitly declares their situation to be one of mission: they have been chosen as God’s special possession to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you” (2:9).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 277.

⁵¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 278.

The means of that mission is the conduct of their lives among the people who do not know God. As “sojourners and exiles” in the world, they must both abstain from evil actions and practice resisting the “passions of the flesh” (2:11). They must also keep their “conduct among the Gentiles honorable ... [that] they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (2:12). The text assumes they will be treated poorly and have evil spoken of them, so part of the purpose of their good conduct is to “silence the ignorance of foolish people” (2:12, 15) and turn it to praise. That kind of life honors God and imitates the example of Jesus Christ in his goodness, suffering, and even death, serving to place Jesus and his glory before watching eyes. To that end, Peter enjoins the church to live lives above reproach and fully participate in the social structures of their day (whether politics, economics, or households) in a manner that visibly honors God—“in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1Pt 4:11).⁵²

The place of the church as “exiles” (“resident aliens,” strangers, or those who are temporary residents in a strange land)⁵³ is directly related to their allegiance to Jesus as Lord and their willingness to emulate him and his suffering. It is a “provisional” status *now* in light of the *not yet* that is to come. The temptation for a church of sojourners is to view their situation in the meantime as a false choice between faithfulness as the church to Jesus or fruitfulness in the community. The two hold together.

⁵² Hunter, *To Change the World*, 231.

⁵³ Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Martin Anton Schmidt, “*Paroikos*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, vol. 5, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964). 851-857.

Hebrews 11-13: Longing for a Better Country

The book of Hebrews underscores this position and posture of the church in the world while clarifying the timeline of its journey between redemption and new creation. In Hebrews, God's people are reminded of their forbearers and called in the present time to emulate their posture of faithfulness. Hebrews is an exhortation to persevere in faith specifically in light of both the past and the promised future. The writer calls God's people to the reality of faith and its unique ability to shape their stance to the world around them. As "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hb 11:1), faith is future-oriented and keyed to God's promise. Faith clings to one's position in Christ, orients a person anew toward God's world, and calls a person forward in faithful obedience to God's leading. Faith "celebrates *now* the reality of the future blessings" which, though currently not seen, are true—just as God's word is true and encourages the heart to hold fast in expectation of the coming of Christ.⁵⁴

As Abram obeyed and went when called to pitch his tents and live as a stranger in a foreign land (Hb 11:8-10) that was simultaneously "the land of promise," so do they. His physical living situation was a parallel to the spiritual posture of all God's church in the world: they "acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth," "seeking a homeland" and "desir[ing] a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Hb 11:13-14, 16). A stranger and an exile—the same word pairing for exile (or "resident aliens") as in 1 Pt 2:11—is not only the social and political location but also the spiritual posture of those in the local church.

⁵⁴ William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Vancouver: Regent, 2004), 146-149.

A robust understanding of Genesis 3 and salvation history makes plain that it is not just the church, but also the world that cannot help but feel a sense of exile. All things in the world suffer the effects of sin and curse. All people are already short of God's glory and looking for the Eden that was theirs. A church's neighbors are wandering and sojourning as well; the difference is that, their destination (as *telos*) remains unknown to them without faith in God. And in a secular age which draws down horizons to the "immanent" frame that privileges only the here and now, such a promise-driven "faith" seems increasing unintelligible and indemonstrable to such neighbors. To use Taylor's phrase, those neighbors are often "cross-pressured" by the variety of options along the belief/unbelief spectrum and are groping for their own way forward. But Christian faith anchors the heart toward the *telos* of God and his coming kingdom, the heavenly city—"the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Hb 11:10). That city already exists—it is one which God "has prepared" (11:10)—yet it is one still to be sought on pilgrimage as "we seek the city that is to come" (Hb 13:14). Voluntary exile is the posture God has chosen for the church. Faithful presence is their obedient response to God's call in their community and for the welfare of their neighbors—specifically in the *now* as they travel a pilgrim road toward the *not yet*.

Such a pilgrim faith celebrates and clings to the "reality of the future blessings"⁵⁵ and anticipates them through a God-honoring cultural life. It is essential that those future blessings not be cut off from real embodied existence as if the heavenly kingdom to be enjoyed were simply a matter of individuals gathered around the King. The kingdom is

⁵⁵ Lane, *Hebrews*, 149.

pictured as a city: a genuine, embodied, cultural reality as witnessed in Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21-22. Its king is the one who promises “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rv 21:5). Hebrews makes clear that it is this promise-anchored, now-celebrating “capacity of faith that allows Christians to maintain a firm grasp on truth which cannot be demonstrated and to display quietness in the presence of hostility.”⁵⁶ Such “godly life” is both the church’s response to God’s call and “the response of committed faith to an alien environment.”⁵⁷

In summary, since the church stands between Christ’s first coming and his return, and must “[a]ct in the appropriate matter for this moment in the story,” every cultural context of the church is now one of voluntary exile on account of its freedom in Christ.⁵⁸ This is a pilgrim song sung in continuity with Israel’s exile in Jeremiah’s day yet now transposed to a significantly different key in Christ: rather than longing for return back to a promised land, the church lives here and now with a full heart as it looks forward with clear eyes to the day of the full new creation. The church is composed of those who, trusting in the Messiah Jesus, are freed from slavery *to* the world and freed for faithful presence *in* the world *for* the good of their neighbors and the glory of Christ. Living as faithfully-present exiles is a political posture among the kingdoms of this world: it involves being in the world, not of the world, but among the world, all for the good of the world and the glory of God.

⁵⁶ Lane, *Hebrews*, 149.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 151-153.

⁵⁸ N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 123.

The Posture of Faithful Presence and the Good of Neighbors

Once in Christ, believers rediscover themselves to be a people in a new location with a new vocation: they are now voluntary exiles in the world for the glory of Christ and the good of the world. When Tim Keller addresses questions of ministry context in *Center Church*, he argues that the church's situation in the cities of the world is what Peter describes as a "*dispersed fellowship of congregations*."⁵⁹ As citizens of the heavenly kingdom and temporary residents in various earthly kingdoms, Christians are charged to seek the welfare of their communities and cultivate a theological vision of gospel and community. This allows them to take seriously ministry to their own local cultural context as a "counterculture for the common good."⁶⁰ They work at their faithful obedience to God's cultural mandate and share in the garden becoming a city by actively seeking God's consummation of all things in the New Jerusalem.⁶¹

As Darrell Guder notes in his work on witness, God values and uses his witnesses' personal experiences of Jesus. He delights in their reliable testimony to him and their changed lives as evidence of his presence, power, and purpose.⁶² Being converted to Christ as his witness does not mean "leav[ing] the societies behind, for they are called to be missionary communities where they are."⁶³ Churches are geographical,

⁵⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 147.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 273.

⁶¹ Ibid., 151.

⁶² Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 56-67.

⁶³ Ibid., 95.

ethnic, and cultural realities that permeate the fabric of their societies. When renewed people approach the work, place, or activities of ordinary life among family, friends, and others, they do so in a manner that makes plain the reign and rule of Christ. These spheres of activity and relationships are not optional add-ons to a faith commitment, but are the necessary domains for working out that faith based on God's promise. It is this ordinary life outside of the gathered worship of Christians that becomes the venue for real missionary encounter and witness to Christ.

Living among the various spheres and domains of creational and cultural life—and discerning the directions of each—is no small matter. In *Awaiting the King*, Smith writes that “in reality, many of these supposed borders are invisible.... There’s no ‘city limit’ sign to the earthly city precisely because the earthy city is less a *place* and more a *way of life*, a constellation of loves and longings and belief bundled up in communal rhythms, routines, and rituals.”⁶⁴ The church always exists in the era between resurrection and return. Smith calls this time the “saeculum, the age in which we find ourselves”—where every authority is accountable to the risen Christ but not every authority acknowledges him.⁶⁵ Loyalties are always in flux. There are always competing visions of what is ultimately good for the church or the culture. Smith reminds us that the “earthly city” is not a matter of earthly/temporal creation, and the “heavenly city” is not a matter of new heaven/earth or eternity. Instead, the “earthly city” is all cultural forms that take their directional cue from the fall, while the “heavenly city” is God’s “society” of people

⁶⁴ Smith, *Awaiting*, 19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

aimed directionally at glorifying God amid the cultural forms of “this world.”⁶⁶ This is not “dual citizenship,” for Christians are citizens of heaven living as its colony in this time and place; they aim to restore and reorder creaturely life to a heavenly pattern.

The posture of faithful presence here in voluntary exile is proper to such pilgrims on earth seeking a better country.⁶⁷ Those who long for a such a country and city to come (Hb 13) live, work, and love in their current countries and cities with renewed intention. Having a posture of faithful presence means working for the common good of the world.⁶⁸ Christians must connect their “means” of discipleship with the “ends” of God’s purpose so that work is worship, cultural activity is cultural renewal, and words and deeds are witness amid with-ness in the world. As Hunter writes: “Insofar as Christians acknowledge the rule of God in all aspects of their lives, their engagement with the world proclaims the shalom to come. Such work may not bring about the kingdom, but it is an embodiment of the values of the coming kingdom and is, thus, a foretaste of the coming kingdom.”⁶⁹

Hunter’s “faithful presence” is a posture constructive for action for the common good because of the creative tensions it brings and the gestures it calls for.⁷⁰ Similar to the exiled church in Babylon, the dispersed communities in 1 Peter, and the assembly called

⁶⁶ Ibid., 46-47.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Awaiting*, 49.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 234.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 231.

forward in Hebrews 11, Hunter notes that churches adopting this posture will have to cultivate a double tension in their lives—one with themselves and then one with their world.⁷¹ This tension opens up creative space for specific gestures to foster cultural renewal between the moments of resurrection and the new creation. First, Christians must live with a tension with themselves by recognizing and repenting of their failures, struggling forward, and seeking a humble, unified witness across Christian tradition.⁷² Second, Hunter calls churches to grapple with a tension with their world by facing the owning the important task of their spiritual formation. This formation takes place in a complicated world. It involves the messy work of affirming and accommodating the good and yet wisely recognizing and humbly resisting what is antithetical to biblical human flourishing.⁷³

This dialectic between affirmation and antithesis is crucial for the church to embrace because of the nature of the gospel. Without it, the church compromises the gospel by either baptizing the cultural status quo or demonizing it. Due to the in-breaking reign of Jesus Christ, every culture (and cultural form) that “receives the gospel, is placed in question by it.”⁷⁴ The encounter between the gospel and culture is necessarily a confrontation, and those working in a local church should expect to find all things in their

⁷¹ Ibid., 279ff.

⁷² Hunter, *To Change the World*, 279-284.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 85.

culture either affirmed or critiqued by the gospel.⁷⁵ This includes the work of identifying the idols (both of the heart and of the contemporary culture) and exposing them in the clear light of the gospel's proclamation.⁷⁶ The tension of being an authentically Christian community in a non-Christian context comes in living embodied lives in time and place. It involves real work, among real people, in a real cultural milieu; but it is on a different, new-creation timeline. So as 1 Peter 2 has it, Christians accommodate where possible to God-given cultural forms and resist where necessary for obedience to God. Whether in the domains of athletics, academics, arts, or any other sphere of life, Christians should expect to encounter structures of life that result in directions that can be discerned and either celebrated or challenged, rejoiced over or resisted and repented from.

Enacted Witness: Gestures for Practicing Faithful Presence

Discipleship that aims at cultural engagement for cultural renewal necessarily evaluates and chooses both models (or postures) and practices (or gestures) that flesh it out in action. This project seeks to borrow and adapt Andy Crouch's language of posture and gestures. He describes our "various responses" toward culture as "postures...our learned but unconscious default position, our natural stance" and contrasts them with "gestures" or specific actions at a given moment that make up the "the repertoire of daily

⁷⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁶ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 161. It is because of the new creation goal of the "coming of God's kingdom in the whole world" that the community of faith necessarily confronts and resists the "idolatries of the public world."

living.”⁷⁷ Those gestures all stem from the multi-faceted witness of Scripture to responses that make sense of our need to both affirm and critique moments and elements in the cultural world we inhabit. When Crouch critically describes four postures toward culture—“condemning, critiquing, copying and consuming—” he suggests that they are actually situationally-appropriate gestures that have hardened into basic postures.⁷⁸

I want to suggest instead that “posture” goes even deeper along the lines of Hunter’s critical contribution. “Posture” is the church’s basic stance toward “culture,” and Hunter’s recommendation is “faithful presence.” Such a posture presents the best fit for the biblical picture of the position of voluntary exile that the Church now has in the wider world. This allows Crouch’s hardened “postures” (including his positive biblical ones of “cultivation” and “creation”) to soften and resume their place in the repertoire of “gestures” available to any church at any time in any culture.⁷⁹

Discerning which gestures to make and when is the creative challenge of substantively answering how we are to live as the faithful presence of Jesus in our own location of voluntary exile. As the church in the late-modern west finds itself increasingly displaced from situations of social, economic, or political power and influence, it has the challenge of re-embracing its position of voluntary exile and rediscovering the appropriate gestures. This creates new opportunities for mission in a new posture as the

⁷⁷ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 90.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 90, 93.

⁷⁹ Crouch, *Culture Making*, 98. Perhaps we might say that such gestures are formed by habits. But not all habits are equal: some habits are better than others. Some habits are malformed and need to be reformed, as will be discussed below.

church learns to reorient itself toward the welfare of the community in which it lives. As Hunter describes it, practicing the posture of faithful presence is a radically incarnational move in the way of Jesus for such voluntary exiles. The hallmarks of one living and loving as faithful presence are “pursuit, identification, and the offer of sacrificial love” on all four fronts: to God, others, our tasks, and our spheres of influence.⁸⁰

When Hunter writes about the second tension Christians inevitably experience doing faithful presence—tensions “with their world”—he opens up space to name specific gestures that might form the substance of the scattered church’s action in the world. The primary avenue for such action in cultural renewal is where Hunter describes faithful presence “to our tasks” and “within our spheres of influence.” In our tasks, as members of Christ’s body, we are to work directionally for the Lord, orienting all of our work and service to him.⁸¹ Within our various spheres of influence, we are to go further and “do what we can to create conditions in the structures of social life we inhabit that are conducive to the flourishing of all.”⁸² It is not less than attending to one’s work with excellence (as worship), with careful ethics (as obedience), or as venue for evangelism (as witness). It is worth noting that each of those may prompt questions or outright conflict in an increasingly dissolute or disenchanted world. But faithful presence calls for more: it is a way of engagement with the world, in, among, and for it, as an expression of embodied life amid this created world and all its cultural development. Four specific

⁸⁰ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 243, 252.

⁸¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 246.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 247.

gestures help enact faithful presence in the now-but-not-yet.

First, believers celebrate common grace and affirm it. Where a church can identify God's common grace at work, it must celebrate and affirm it and the common concern it brings. This is a matter of individual actions, institutional realities, and whole domains and spheres of created and cultivated life. Common grace is part of God's work in the manifold ways he carries out the "multiplicity" of his divine purpose through the entire created order.⁸³ As Miroslav Volf puts it, "in their daily work, human beings are coworkers in God's kingdom which completes creation and renews heaven and earth."⁸⁴ They work right alongside neighbors (whether from other nations, tribes, or tongues) who may not know the Lord but are nevertheless engaged in cultivation of his created order by both development and conservation.⁸⁵ It is important to remember that affirmation in any created sphere is not simply "uncritical appreciation" or an over-confidence in one's ability to discern God's actions.⁸⁶ Celebration and affirmation move the church toward the world with a godly curiosity, and results in both the noticing and naming of aspects of

⁸³ Bacote, *Spirit in Public Theology*, 112, following Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 62.

⁸⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 100.

⁸⁵ Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology*, 121.

⁸⁶ Smith, *Awaiting*, 123-124. Smith is critical here of how common grace offers a generic "licensing Christian participation in the public sphere." But his complaint lies where it fails to attend to local context or history and instead claims what is in actuality the effect of God's special grace through Christian work. For a better discussion of common grace and providence and the danger of neglecting or denying common grace, see Mouw's second chapter in *He Shines in All That's Fair*. Bacote himself acknowledges that as recipients of the "particular grace" of God in Christ, Christians can "recognize and appreciate the potential in the created order by virtue of common grace and then engage the various arenas or spheres of society with the intent of glorifying God by developing those relatively independent spheres according to the divine ordinances." Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology*, 124n13.

creation and culture worth celebrating. It primes us to embrace the next two gestures that mirror the the classic spiritual practices of resistance and rediscovery.⁸⁷

Second, the church partners in the common good and advances it. By scattering throughout its community, a local church rediscovers the flourishing of the whole community. It seeks to be agents who “forge common life” amidst neighbors with whom they might confess different beliefs or divide in diverse ways, but for whom they nevertheless seek harmony, peace, and flourishing “in the shared territory of creation.”⁸⁸ Believers actively “encourage harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, security, and well-being.”⁸⁹ Doing so advocates for the common good of one’s community, city, and country despite the direction of its citizens’ hearts and habits. The church must demonstrate a concern for “common good and civil society” by moving toward the world and the good of others. It must also turn away from the temptation to retreat and withdraw into a more pure form.⁹⁰ With respect to the actual tasks in the domains where they are committed, Hunter charges Christians to embrace what is substantial, enduring, deep, of “quality, skill, and excellence,” and do so with an ambition chastened by faith, hope, and love. They are to recognize that all tasks have “spiritual

⁸⁷ While “resistance” might be the next step following the creation-fall-redemption-new creation paradigm, it seems that rediscovery (here, “advancing the common good”) is proper partly because this notion itself needs to be rediscovered for Christians. Once they do so and begin from a point of affirmation and lead with a “Yes!” to such a mission, the plenteous opportunities for a “No” of resistance become more clear. Faithful presence begins with a yes of proclamation before a no of protest.

⁸⁸ Smith, *Awaiting*, 132.

⁸⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 247-248.

⁹⁰ Smith, *Awaiting*, 119-120.

significance” in that they are to be done well, before God, by his Spirit, and for the good of others and the glory of God.⁹¹ In such work, Christians should not hesitate to “bend social practices and policy *for the good of our neighbors*” by consciously relying on the “directional” resources given by God’s revelation.⁹² When Christians engage in this manner, they identify with their neighbors and stand alongside them as participants in the good work commissioned by God for humans to do.

Third, the church must discern any mis-direction present and resist it or subvert it. The corresponding side of advancing good for Christians (individually or communally) is to practice “constructive resistance that seeks new patterns of social organization that challenge, undermine, and otherwise diminish oppression, injustice, enmity, and corruption....”⁹³ Such active resistance is a protest that the current order of a heart, a habit, a group, an organization, or a whole society does not reflect God’s intended shalom. The church operates in full view of the gospel’s challenge to broken cultural habits and twisted directions of our cultural domains and lives with a clear awareness that our hearts, tasks, and domains of influence are too easily captured by the reigning idols. Confronting these at the personal and communal level is part of the missionary encounter required.⁹⁴ When motivated by a gospel response of mercy and justice, cultural renewal work is kept from being developed solely as a Christian gloss on the good things of the

⁹¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 253.

⁹² Smith, *Awaiting*, 141-142. Smith notes that Christians cannot simply ignore the resources of revelation in the name of being pluralistic: doing so would allow the “neutral” to become a totalizing influence and naturalize or normalize whatever rules at the moment.

⁹³ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 247.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

world that remains insensitive to evil and disintegration. Such confrontation may bring suffering, but believers and their communities may proceed confident of God's providential care for them and their world.

Fourth, the church must care for the wounded and embrace them. In the confrontation with idols and principalities of the world, the church reminds the world that it need not remain the world apart from Christ. It has been loved in this manner: by the sending of Jesus Christ for saving, not condemning (Jn 3:16-17). The church has a critical opportunity to embrace those wounded by culture wars or those emerging shell-shocked from the flotsam and jetsam of late-modern life. Our own American world is pockmarked not only by older impacts of the gospel's penetration into society, but also by the eviscerating influence of a totalizing market and state. Levin articulates how our culture is accelerating in isolation and social fracture, resulting in a "bifurcation" into increasingly polarized winners and losers. He notes the incredible opportunity to be an "attractive example," a "vast and beautiful 'yes'" of an alternative community that might "alleviate loneliness and brokenness."⁹⁵ It becomes particularly important here to hold these second and third gestures (advancing common good and resisting mis-direction) together in the local community, for many of the social structures of mid-size groups, "voluntary societies," or subsidiary communities that may have once helped foster local *shalom* have now fallen into disrepair.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, 164.

⁹⁶ See the lively interaction between Smith and Levin's contemporary analysis here in Smith, *Awaiting*, 126-130. Smith provides a clear example (on education) of sharp thinking and careful action that could be a road map for Christians working to advance the common good in a similarly suffering area.

One of the great privileges of the church is social charity that incarnates the love of God for its neighbors. But this will not happen by waiting for neighbors to come to a church: a church must go out to its neighbors. This happens through the scattered forms of cultural work and entails finding willing partners who can make common cause in celebration, advancing the good, resisting the evil, and caring for the wounded.⁹⁷ Here, church not only identifies with its neighbors but also lays down its life for them in practical and meaningful ways. This may look like an act of repentance for unwarranted triumphalism or repairing and healing the collateral damage it caused by fighting with the weapons of this world rather than witnessing to the cross. In humbling itself this way, it further identifies with its Savior who has gone “outside the camp” (Hb 13:14-16) to suffer with and for others in the reclamation of creation and all who belong to him.⁹⁸

Finally, when Christians committed to faithful presence gather for collective action guided by the gestures above, they make clear they are acting in the name and the new creation of Jesus Christ rather than their own names or brand. Cultural renewal is a communal activity that cannot be left to the province of individual actors who are isolated in a secular age and idolize the expressive self’s search for authenticity. Such individualism is also ineffective in a contemporary moment that pushes toward polar opposition and hollows out smaller, subsidiary communities that might provide the necessary means for re-engaging in individual, meaningful relationships and renewing

⁹⁷ For an example of potential directions for this kind of work that bridges caring for the wounded with advancing common good, see David Brooks, “The Next Culture War,” *The New York Times*, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/30/opinion/david-brooks-the-next-culture-war.html> and “Let’s Have a Better Culture War,” *The New York Times*, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/07/opinion/lets-have-a-better-culture-war.html>.

⁹⁸ Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 135.

the social and cultural fabric of a local place. If the church shows up consistently, over time, it provides breathing room so relationships can grow, friendships can thrive, and partnerships can take root. Hunter himself notes that faithful presence must move into the space of “overlapping networks” of relational partners or institutional forms that collaborate in action and arrange resources for advancing the good within specific domains.⁹⁹

In review, recovering the vocation of witness in the various spheres of cultural life is a task of what Guder calls “‘Pentecostal translation’—learning to speak the language of the culture” into which the church finds itself sent as Christ’s witness.¹⁰⁰ This learning comes about as a result of loving those in the place to which they are sent. Christians have the challenge of practicing a discerning, faithful presence that brings faith, hope, and love to bear in a kind of “covenantal” commitment to their place and time. That in turn brings about what Hunter calls a “realization” of “meaning,” “purpose,” and the exercise of “grace, mercy, and justice.”¹⁰¹ The particular place and shape of cultural renewal will depend greatly on the situation of the local church membership as they inhabit these practices and cultivate fluency in these gestures.¹⁰² Life lived this way is a sign of the new right in the middle of the old. As Hunter says: “until

⁹⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 270-271.

¹⁰⁰ Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 86.

¹⁰¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 263.

¹⁰² Smith, *Awaiting*, 132-134. The local ground of these efforts is the place where diverse forces clash and conflict, and attention there keeps local church from the temptation of getting lost in national partisanship on the latest issue or in grand efforts to hammer out a big-picture “principled pluralism.”

God brings forth the new heaven and the new earth, he calls believers, individuals and as a community, to conform to Christ and embody within every part of their lives, the shalom of God ... *to live toward the well-being of others, not just to those within the community of faith, but to all.*"¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 229-230.

CHAPTER 4:

RENEWING THE HABITS AND REVISIONING THE STRUCTURES

This chapter attempts to lay the structural and formational groundwork for the ministry project of renewed discipleship. The ministry project presented here seeks to design and implement a discipleship strategy for the church that involves both short-term training and longer-term communities of mission placed in specific spheres of ordinary life. Habits of formation and questions of structure require rethinking and readjusting considering the changes in cultural situation. The transitions taking place in the contemporary secular culture present western churches with an opportunity for powerful new missionary encounters between the culture they live in and the gospel they have received. Despite the dissolution, diffusion, distraction, and divisions that plague our social context, there is a unique opportunity for people of all generations, united in Christ, to rediscover their vocation as human beings. Gifted by the Spirit differently and bearing a unique story, each now lives renewed in God's image and redirected for the ministry of cultural renewal. As our pastoral team at Signal Pres wrote, the opportunity to

involve men and women in witness “will require new ways of reaching out and offering ownership” and clarifying contribution.¹

One challenge is how to form believers to be the faithful presence of Jesus in their ordinary lives and see beyond the divides of sacred and secular, private and public, heaven and earth, church and world. That will mean beginning with members—and even neighbors—who are already malformed by a world that privileges the secular, shrinks horizons to the immanent frame of here, now, and “me.” These factors and forces leave the average person dizzy with anxiety, pressure, and loneliness on their quest for meaning. Discipleship into faithful presence must take care that the structures of the organized church not only bring people within its orbit but also commission and send them back into the world.

Hunter names this dilemma: “what has been missing is a leadership that comprehends the nature of these challenges and offers a vision of formation adequate to the task of discipling the church and its members for a time such as ours.”² As this ministry focus paper has argued, improvement is not a matter of more thinking or more effort, but of reading the times rightly, re-story-ing our faith, and recovering a calling and the gestures that fit a biblical posture. This chapter takes up the crucial burdens of leadership facing those who desire to cultivate the posture and gestures of faithful presence among the various cultural spheres. It recognizes that we as church leaders must then “renew our habits for formation” and “revise our structures of forming leaders.”

¹ “Ten Megatrends.”

² Hunter, *To Change the World*, 226.

Renewing the Habits

The local church therefore needs to get serious about its own reformation in worship and discipleship. It needs formation that evokes Christian hope and character for evangelical action. As Smith writes, the local church is a “habit-forming polis in which we gather to be shaped and (re)formed by the Spirit in ways that make us good neighbors, even to our enemies.”³ The practice of Christian worship becomes absolutely critical as the link that holds together formation in Christ and for witness in the world. It forms the virtue of discernment, which then funds the options of “participation, collaboration, and critique” for all engagement in public life.⁴ The unique facet of the church’s worship is that it begins with the end (eschatology) and ends in sending (mission). The church thus recognizes no ground as neutral: Jesus Christ’s kingship means that the state has been relativized even though it is still authorized and accountable. Jesus’ church teaches his world to pray for his kingdom to come.⁵ A strategy of discipleship for cultural renewal does well to remember that faithful worship is the critical link that keeps the Church from being spiritualized (privatized and ahistorical) or naturalized (simply baptizing the movements of the day as God’s mission).

The task set before the Church is careful formation of people for a life of faithful presence through cultural engagement with the wider world. Tim Keller writes that “we must see the gathered church as the great vehicle for this restoration—and yet individual

³ Smith, *Awaiting*, 150.

⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁵ Ibid., 158-161.

Christians out in the world can be said to be representatives of the kingdom as well.”⁶ As Keller writes, “the most practical single way a church can implement a missional mindset” is “training and equipping the people of the church for ministry.”⁷ Both Hunter and Smith agree on this point. Following the priority of what Keller calls “the first front of ministry engagement” (with God in worship), Hunter considers forming disciples for life in the world to be “the central ministry of the church.”⁸ In Smith’s opinion, a church’s ministry must intentionally help people be “centered in the formational disciplines of the heavenly *polis*” in preparation for cultural engagement.⁹ This entails reprioritizing ways of training and teaching and renewing attention to classic habits.

Equipping the Saints: Ephesians 4

A first, crucial step in this process is the recovery of the nature of the church’s mission and ministry. When a church delves into questions of its mission, it is not so much borrowing from the cultural examples of corporate leadership as it is inquiring back into its origins in the sending of the Son by the Father and in the power of the Spirit. It is sent as witness *of* and by witness *to* Christ. The very mission of the church is a participation in the mission of Christ by his Spirit. It is an every-member mission belonging to the whole (not a class, order, or part).¹⁰

⁶ Keller, *Center Church*, 229.

⁷ Ibid., 274.

⁸ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 236-237.

⁹ Smith, *Awaiting*, 55.

¹⁰ Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity*, 125.

The same extends to the shape a particular church's ministry. As Paul writes, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12). The work of "ministry" is the work of "service or servanthood" (*diakonia*) in the way of Jesus Christ himself.¹¹ As Hendrik Kraemer writes, the whole people (*laos*) of God are chosen by God as recipients of his grace, united to Jesus Christ by his Spirit, and charged with administering his grace/gifts in the world.¹²

Kraemer's critical contribution is twofold and coincides with what Tim Keller calls "centering" the missional church. First, Kraemer calls for the typical clergy role to be converted to the biblical office of equipping. The clergy/laity divide should be seen as an unfortunate holdover from medieval Catholicism and the reformation carried through by abolishing the distinction. The whole body should be regarded as co-laborers with and for Christ—one re-created people (justified by one faith in one Lord) who are now freed for the one work of ministry/service.¹³ Keller identifies the proper work of the organized church as the "work of evangelizing and equipping people to be disciples."¹⁴ Keller would preserve the distinction between special and general offices in the church, but orient the typically ordained office of elder in the direction of shepherding the "gathered"

¹¹ See e.g., Mark 10:44-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 12:24-26. Given our cultural and historical context, the contemporary translation of *diakonia* as "ministry" instead of service elides the basic conception of service in favor of an ecclesial or "churchy" focus.

¹² Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity*, 49-54.

¹³ Ibid., 63-73. Kraemer praises the Reformation's recovery of the "priesthood of all believers," but notes it became more a rallying cry than an "energizing, vital principle" for organization.

¹⁴ Keller, *Center Church*, 268.

church in its organized form.¹⁵ This includes the work of equipping: all the catechesis, correction, care and cure of souls proper to discipling and helping them “cultivate their heavenly citizenship” in ordinary, earthly life.¹⁶

Second, Kraemer calls the churches to see their people less as an “untapped reservoir” of volunteers for ministry/service in the church and more as the very essence of the church’s ministry/service in the world.¹⁷ The whole of the body of the church, scattered in their various homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and domains of cultural life, is to serve Christ and love others “in all spheres of secular life.”¹⁸ In Keller’s view, the primary ministry/service of the church here in “sending the ‘organic’ church—Christians at work in the world—to engage culture, do justice, and restore God’s shalom.”¹⁹ This is a revolution and paradigm shift for typical church ministry. The church and world meet each other in and through believers acting as the faithful presence of Jesus’ love in ordinary life. Given the three realities of God’s grace, the cultural mandate in Genesis of development and conservation, and the various spheres and domains of cultural spheres of action, a church’s leadership must cooperate with the Spirit in releasing the laity to do this work of service in their various domains of life. By “making something of the world”²⁰ in their homes and healthcare, neighborhoods and networks,

¹⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 344-348.

¹⁶ Smith, *Awaiting*, 197.

¹⁷ Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity*, 34-37.

¹⁸ Ibid., 149.

¹⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 268.

²⁰ Crouch, *Culture Making*, 23-24.

daily work and domestic responsibilities, recreation and entertainments, every member of the Church engages in God's good-but-fallen world *as* the church of Jesus Christ. They are in the world but not of the world.

Recovering this sense of mission and ministry helps reorient a church for navigating political and public life. Along with Hunter, Smith is critical of a “narrow political-centrism that has too often dominated evangelical Protestant concepts of cultural influence.”²¹ Politics needs to be dethroned from its pretensions to the ultimate and relativized as one among the spheres of work, family, education, arts, athletics, entertainment, economics, and more. As political power becomes less of a lever the kingdom of God looks to pull for influence, the other spheres of society are elevated as avenues for Christians to be faithfully present to neighbors in their specific cultures.²² This will not come about by first prioritizing individual hearts and minds, then society or government after. Embodied people need embodied habits encouraged by the communal, cultural forms to be shaped as ambassadors of an altogether-different kingdom.

Therefore, the form of every local church is provisional as it anticipates in its life and ministry Christ's renewal and restoration of all things. It participates in Christ's own ministry toward that end in the particularities of its own time and place. A church's current context is where the “new creation” life of the church is manifest and is why the proper work of the church should be “world-centered in the image of the divine

²¹ Smith, *Awaiting*, 10 fn24.

²² In our own church as I taught this, we got sidetracked one evening on a lively discussion regarding the place of the church in politics. It revealed a double feature of our course in fall 2017: a generational divide on whether politics has helped or hurt the church's public witness, and a theological divide on whether the church should be aligned with American liberalism's culture and governance.

example.” Jesus himself.²³ It is in the everyday life of the world that new creation people both engage the world’s questions and needs and confront its lost-ness and mis-directed aims.²⁴ In doing so, they unlearn a corrosive dualism and relearn that the whole of life is to be lived before the face of God. The key role of local church elders (sent in their role of teaching, preaching, evangelizing, and more) is to steward the call to pastor the church in both its gathered and sent form. Though pastors should not be the chief trainers for every domain of cultural engagement, they do still have an appropriate pastoral role.²⁵

Renewing Habits for Action

Christian discipleship for cultural engagement employs appropriate practices that foster the gestures that best fit the posture of faithful presence. Cultural work is never value-free; all habits, practices, and rituals come to us in non-neutral forms already embedded the frameworks and background of the world. They carry a way of seeing and being the world and they form us for better or for worse. As Smith writes in *Imagining the Kingdom*, “story” is central to the unconscious priming for embodied action. Recognizing and submitting to new practices and habits of seeing and living that fit a re(new)ed story is required for formation in cultural renewal. A necessary change in practice is “to reactivate and renew those liturgies, rituals, and disciplines that

²³ Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity*, 130.

²⁴ Ibid., 128.

²⁵ Smith, *Awaiting*, 197-200. Drawing on Augustine’s example, Smith states this explicitly: “every pastor—is a pastor not only of the gathered church but also of the sent church ... not only the church as institute [organization] but also the church as organism.”

intentionally embody the story of the gospel and enact a vision of the coming kingdom.”²⁶

Spiritual disciplines are activities undertaken by a believer to help bring him or her into a growing cooperation with Jesus Christ and his kingdom.²⁷ They take into account the integrated “whole” of the human person: heart and mind, body and soul. But as Kyle David Bennett writes, they are not private spiritual exercises to help one get close (or closer) to God: like a new drug where one becomes a slave to getting the best stuff, doing it fast and hard enough to get the right fix.²⁸ Neither are they a pile of curated goods with which to further buffer or adorn the self for mutual public display.

Spiritual disciplines are not means of ceding or controlling one’s spiritual growth development; they are ways to be cooperative with and responsive to the Spirit’s lead. As Dallas Willard writes, “The action of the Spirit must be accompanied by our response, which, as we have seen, cannot be carried out by anyone other than ourselves.”²⁹ For human beings, bodies are the center (and agent) of our one’s personal kingdom. That kingdom is exercised by the will, mind, and heart as an instrument of desires and intentions in service of one’s deepest love or chief end.³⁰ The body are the locus of both

²⁶ Smith, *Imagining*, 132.

²⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1991), 150.

²⁸ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 7, 13. The problem lies less in their failure to provide such a fix and more in that the nature of such a pursuit fails to love God and one’s neighbor.

²⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1998), 348.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 353.

the worst anti-Kingdom habits that need to be broken in repenting and believing and the new habits acquired by grace in the Kingdom of the Son.

The classic spiritual disciplines become the means of transformation in the life of the believer.³¹ They are visible in (and patterned after) the life of Jesus Christ and passed down through the Church. They can be understood as belonging more in the studio than the museum: both these arenas exist for art, but whereas the museum tells stories and displays work from other artists, the studio operates as a messy space for current development and bringing a vision to life.³² Spiritual formation by God's word and Spirit in the sphere of our embodied human lives is an active process for participants, not spectators. One does them in order to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in becoming a person renewed and re-commissioned in Christ. They entail rhythms for learning to love God with the whole heart, mind, soul, and strength and love neighbors as ourselves.³³ Centered in God's story, they take believers out of a story of self-consciousness where they display their story before others and put them in a different "performative" mode: acting in and acting out God's story of bringing life and light to the world.³⁴

Spiritual disciplines are thus embodied habits or practices that serve to renew the life of the believer. They facilitate participation in Jesus' fuller renewal of his creation by

³¹ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 351.

³² Mark Scandrette, *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 40-41.

³³ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 13. Bennett describes this as encapsulating both the "vertical" and the "horizontal" dimensions necessarily present in spiritual disciplines.

³⁴ Smith, *Imagining*, 148-150.

his Spirit.³⁵ Bennett draws on Abraham Kuyper's vision of the Church as both institute (gathered) and organism (scattered) to locate the spiritual disciplines for cultural renewal. While liturgical practices in gathered worship "give us a vision for life" that help us "see, imagine, and move in the world," spiritual disciplines are a "way of life that witnesses to the vision for life we learn in and through the institutional church."³⁶ They are the necessary correlate to the habits practiced in the liturgy and provide hands-on training for daily life together in service to Christ and his world.

Christian formation for cultural renewal must dive deep into these basic practices that convey the true story of the world. Of the many potential disciplines that foster renewed habits of living, there are four in particular that help to form disciples for taking up leadership in cultural renewal and training bodies for faithful presence: studying to be re-story-ed, celebrating, repenting and (re)believing, and deepening relationships. These four habits serve as counter-formation to the typical patterns of the world and reorient the church to renewed ways of living.

The first habit is studying to be re-story-ed.³⁷ James Smith references Alasdair McIntyre's point that "I can't answer the question, 'what ought I to do?' unless I have already answered a *prior* question, 'Of which story am I a part?' It is a story that provides the moral map of the universe."³⁸ Since our practices and habits carry a story in them and

³⁵ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 168.

³⁶ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 172-173.

³⁷ Smith, *Imagining*, 160. This turn of phrase is adapted from Smith's point that "sanctifying perception" must come by "restor(y)ing the imagination," and leaders here must "tell that story" and "teaching *in* stories."

³⁸ Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University Of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216. Cited in Smith, *Imagining*, 108.

intend a particular world, it is necessary to give careful attention to the story we the church tell of the world: where we are, what we are, what has gone wrong, what is the solution, and when we are in *this* story in light of its end. This means recovering the biblical narrative as the true story of the whole world—both at a macro level for all of humanity and the micro level for us as a community and individuals. The biblical story can be winsomely told in a simple message or shared in a conversation. But the discipline of study—reading the Scriptures, asking questions, delving into what has been taught and thought before in our great tradition—is necessary to learn both the framework of the drama and the actors and movements within it. There is a necessarily personal element here where the story shifts from one known or learned to one inhabited and performed. Members of the body, individually and together, are called to play a part in faithful improvisation in their day and time.³⁹ Since that story (affectively told and shown) conscripts the imagination, it necessarily incorporates the body by teaching practices that correlate with and enact it. The next three habits must remember to carry this specific story forward in an embodied way to avoid lapsing into story-telling, not story-living.

The second habit is celebrating creation and culture. Christians have a tradition of cultivating joy in affirming with God the goodness of his creation. Each and every day, people deal with the substance of creation and the cultural realities human beings have made of it—whether articles or artifacts, forests or factories, individual realities or institutional norms. However, the conceptual metaphor primary in a secular age is “nature” rather than “creation,” whereas the former tends toward centering on self and

³⁹ Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 123-127.

facilitates exploitation, the latter imagines a “different world” and a “different calling” within it before one’s Creator and alongside other creatures.⁴⁰ Celebration is a habit of engagement that leads us to pause, recognize the goodness of God’s created world, and gratefully live in the world as one of God’s good creatures. As Dallas Willard writes, celebration leads us “to enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on *our* life and world as God’s work and God’s gift to us.”⁴¹ Celebration nurtures the root of gratitude and practices a habit of seeing this world as God’s good world and sphere of his action. It turns us away from malformed ways of interacting with creation (such as thoughtless consumption or exploitation for our own ends) and turns us toward the Creator in praise and thanks. Habits of celebration are not mere affirmation of everything: celebration, too, is subject to discerning structure and direction at our moment of the story.

Third is the practice of repenting and (re)believing. Humans, too, are part of the mis-directed way of the world and must be brought back to the true story found in Christ. Churches must grapple with ways in which they have failed, as individuals and as a community, to honor God by living out the gospel and living into their position of voluntary exile and posture of faithful presence. Hunter calls the church to relearn how to exercise power in conformity with “the way of Jesus” rather than borrow categories or adopt practices that are operative in the world.⁴² One of the primary ways they do this is

⁴⁰ Smith, *Imagining*, 123-124. We imagine because we have been captured by stories, primed to perceive, and incorporated into a habitus; hence the importance of being (re)stor(i)ed.

⁴¹ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 179.

⁴² Hunter, *To Change the World*, 247.

by learning to practice the rhythm of repenting and (re)believing. Mike Breen's layout of this gospel movement of repenting and believing helps connect the individual habit for believers to a cultural habit for a community or a group in growing cooperation with God's kingdom.⁴³ It takes people through the "Learning Circle" for enacted repentance: beginning with being confronted by God's word in a local situation, it moves through a process of observation, reflection, discussion, a renewed habit of obedient action, and accountability.⁴⁴ Renewal exists in these two parts: beginning with God's initiative in gracious conviction and then cooperation with the Spirit's work in re-directed action.

The fourth and final habit is cultivating deeper relationships in three dimensions: attending to God, to others, and neighbors in one's world. Relationships are the concrete expression of committed love that attends both to God and to one's neighbors in faithful presence. Christians privilege their local community and context when they "yield their will to God and to nurture and cultivate the world where God has placed them."⁴⁵ There is no real life with God apart from one's embodied life amid a particular place, time, and people. So Hunter calls churches to faithfulness *in place*: to "attend to the people and places that they experience directly ... the community, the neighborhood, and the city, and the people of which these are constituted."⁴⁶ Doing this will aid recovery of a "preference for stability, locality, and particularity of place and its needs" as the "crucible

⁴³ Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 2nd ed., (Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2011), 55-63.

⁴⁴ In our course we worked on this by way of Mark 1:15, 2 Cor. 14-21, and Mark 10:35-45 for revisioning our ways of power and influence within a particular domain of cultural life.

⁴⁵ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 253

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

within which Christian holiness is forged” and “shalom is enacted.”⁴⁷

Intentional practice of deeper relationships calls believers out of individuality and into community. Breen’s *Building a Discipling Culture* provides a helpful rubric for relationships: believers being discipled in the way of Jesus continually attend to relational engagements “up” (to the Father in love and worship), “in” (to the local fellowship of believers), and “out” (to the wider, hurting world via our neighbors, networks, and tasks in our various domains of life).⁴⁸ Practicing relationships in all three dimensions prevents a church from collapsing in on itself internally, losing its center in worship, or voiding its witness in and to the world.⁴⁹ This helps believers integrate their full lives along the lines of God’s directions. It also helps them resist the temptation to compartmentalize certain parts of their lives from the gospel’s influence.

In summary, these habits are “practices of love” that incarnate the story of God’s love, in service to neighbors, through normal cultural activities, as a witness to a renewed way of living.⁵⁰ Since the disciplines function as horizontal channels of neighbor-love, Bennett suggests they are the missing link toward a weighty and substantial picture of the common good. These practices are personal but not private, and they need the aim of loving God and neighbor to channel their focus.⁵¹ Talk of the “common good” is just

⁴⁷ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 253.

⁴⁸ Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 67-70.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 67ff.

⁵⁰ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 34.

⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

wishful thinking about different goods without the specificity of believers loving their neighbors in Christ. Classic habits like these form better and more durable bonds of love with others than the modern moral order's demands (as Taylor describes them) for universal "solidarity" with and "benevolence" towards all.⁵² They are an explicit rebuttal to the notion that the self is the source of moral motivation.⁵³ They deny the idea that the means or end of human flourishing is achievable without reference to the One who creates, redeems, and sustains human life. Such practices, rightly seen and lived, are connected to the domains of ordinary life in God's creation. They reform patterns of living and renew engagement with others and God's world.

Revisioning the Structures: Communities and Leadership

The second part of this chapter on "revisioning the structures" examines the structures and systems most relevant to leading cultural renewal in our current situation and makes recommendations for future practice. The goal is to form cultural activity not simply for excellence (as worship), evangelism (in motivation or outcome), or ethics (obedience as a cultural distinctive), but for participation in our human calling and the ministry of Christ who is renewing all things.⁵⁴ This ministry project takes up that charge and seeks to develop that kind of discipleship for the community of Signal Pres with a combination of theological vision, biblical story, and personal and communal practices within a structure that releases them for renewed, organic leadership in cultural areas.

⁵² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 540-541, 695-697.

⁵³ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁴ Keller and Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor*, 5-8, 149-150.

Organizing for Action: Small-Scale Communities

Of the many “means” available as venues for cultural action, this renewal project takes account of the Reformed theological and political tradition of looking at culture, society, and community through the lenses of spheres and domains. The integrity of creational and cultural life existing before God and directed to glorify God is not threatened by the structural diversity of various forms of life. Abraham Kuyper argued for a “sphere sovereignty” that understands cultural life in a series of arenas or domains of life where each has a creational purpose (reason for being) and a rightful ordering.⁵⁵ The precise numbering and naming of these spheres is debated, but it serves the purpose here to recognize that “Economic activity aims at stewardship” and “Politics aims at justice,” while one could further describe the family, the church, arts and entertainment, science, etc.⁵⁶ Each distinct sphere has its own kind of authority and unique series of relationships. The principle of subsidiarity argues further for a kind of decentralization within each sphere that keeps it from becoming a monolithic whole and squashing the creativity and diversity present in the smaller spaces of creation and culture.⁵⁷

Grasping a proper relationship of the spheres or domains to God and to one another unleashes the church’s equipping of people for their service in the creational and cultural spheres of human life. To paint in broad strokes, a medieval Christendom view

⁵⁵ Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26. See also Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, 142-143, 196-197.

expressed God's authority through the authority of the church over all spheres of life.⁵⁸ A modern secularist view might consider every sphere liberated from relationship or accountability to "god" or some spiritual reality "beyond" the immanent frame of life. It might also relegate all such questions to a purely individual or privatized corporate domain. But Kuyper's work reaffirms the authority of God over each sphere (and accountability of each to God) and draws on the Reformation's recovery of the gospel to advocate for the presence of faithful Christians in each sphere as the real work of the scattered church. As Richard Mouw puts it, the church is both its own "specific sphere, an area of cultural activity that exists alongside other spheres" in its organized form of churches *and* the faithful presence of Christ in organic form as Christians scattered amidst all other spheres of cultural life.⁵⁹

Though *Awaiting the King* is a political theology, Smith's vision is broadly cultural and applicable to the various spheres and domains that comprise the public life of those engaged in cultural renewal. For him, political engagement is less a discussion of "place" (how church/state interact and what territory belongs to each) and more a "project" of communities that form people for rival journeys in broader public life.⁶⁰ Smith maintains that local churches must learn to resist attempts to have the "Church" relativized to one sphere amongst many, thereby "naturalizing" or "secularizing" politics

⁵⁸ The following descriptions are adapted from Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 41-42, 56-59.

⁵⁹ Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 58. In this manner, a local church (or even association or denomination of churches) is part of the diversity within the sphere of the Church.

⁶⁰ Smith, *Awaiting*, 8-11.

and hiding its ultimate pretensions.⁶¹ Following the recognition that the gospel encompasses salvation history and is transcultural in application, Smith reminds his readers that gospel work is always “essentially contextual” to the particulars of history, culture, time and place. A church must be attentive to past, future, and present to discern the shape of faithful presence in the here and now rather than attempt to settle such matters once for all time.⁶²

Contextualization for renewal as a scattered church is not a matter for individual action only. The ability of the average individual actor to bring about cultural change is sorely limited. Depending on the individual to be the main agent of change is a function of both our late modern age’s commitment to expressive individualism and a misguided notion of how culture is influenced.⁶³ Following Kuyper, Mouw calls for churches to “form sub-communities that focus on obedience to the will of God for the various cultural spheres.”⁶⁴ These smaller groups for collective action become avenues for discerning together how to (re)orient a domain of life before the Lord and creatively consider what gestures are most appropriate in this time or place. They have the further advantage of renewing relationships with others within a particular sphere and encountering men and women who might share common cause or labor for the common good. They might join existing organizations, form associations, reinvigorate an atrophied domain of life, or

⁶¹ Ibid., 141.

⁶² Smith, *Awaiting*, 124-25. Smith advocates here for the sphere sovereignty and the flourishing of “micro societies” such as described below, 124-130.

⁶³ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 24-27, 77-78, 168. This is the heart of Hunter’s critique of the “hearts and minds” approach to cultural change by both the left and right wings of the church.

⁶⁴ Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 58.

work as a small conspiracy of friends. But as they work together, they both re-weave the fabric of community in a local place and constitute a visible witness to the world of cultural engagement for the glory of God. These missional groups are less centered on sharing a world view and more engaging in world-viewing and world-living by the combined light of special and common grace.⁶⁵ Each of these small communities become a reality that stands alongside the individual, the wider society (as seen in the various domains), and the culture.⁶⁶ They each have the challenge of cultivating a particular sphere of society. They practice habits of thought and action that create and share memories, promote cooperation, and enact hope that reflects and projects the gospel.⁶⁷

An effort in intentional cultural renewal requires taking stock of people's spiritual gifts. It also entails discovering where their age or station in life (e.g. grandmother or busy young dad) puts them most frequently in terms of physical venues and relational networks. Further, it takes into account their passions or interests in the world of cultural activity and considers whatever domains or channels of cultural life in which a person is already most committed. An effort like this needs to prompt questions and discern answers on the default settings of people's hearts, minds, and attitudes toward their wider cultural world. For instance, Keller writes that people might perceive their culture along the lines of one of our four seasons (like summer or winter) and have an attitude that

⁶⁵ Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 93. A significant challenge here is the task of discernment. There will be a great temptation to divide everything into strictly orthodox categories of left/right, right/wrong, faithful/unfaithful and a great opportunity to discover what it means to be incarnationally present for witness. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 753.

⁶⁶ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 79-80.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 83-83.

accompanies it. Or they might tilt toward one end of a spectrum between “pessimistic or optimistic” on the possibilities of cultural influence or change.⁶⁸

As to the specific spheres and domains of cultural life, a ministry of discipleship that equips for cultural renewal must take account of its own people, time, and places where its members are naturally engaged. A church like Signal Pres may have intuitively formed niche interest or affinity groups (e.g. moms who are foster parents, older members in a neighborhood group, dads whose kids play sports together, etc.). But without care, they may serve more as attractional magnets rather than avenues for the mission of cultural renewal. An initial assessment of the place of Signal Pres’ members cultural engagement and the seasons of their lives (from teenagers to older retired persons) suggests that the primary domains in operation are family life, education, and the various sub-domains and relationships springing up around them of arts, academics, and athletics. These are closely followed by networks and neighbors as modes of meaningful friendship and relationship, and then various avenues of volunteering as “service” or within specific ministries of mercy and justice.⁶⁹ When these activities get unhooked from the gospel story, renewed habits of living, and gestures of thoughtful action, they become identity-markers that reveal idols of individual achievement, success, and display. They undercut the primary commitments of faith, family, and friendship they purport to serve.

⁶⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 238, 225

⁶⁹ For this ministry focus, we did not pursue “work/vocation” as a domain, both because there was another local effort tackling that and because we hoped to involve students and families in cultural venues more often associated with school and student life.

In this manner, church-based discipleship for cultural renewal must lean into wherever people are gifted, called, already engaged, and most interested for the sake of faithful witness. It does not ask them to do more or tackle something entirely new, but to do normal life with renewed intention, commitment, and relationships. It does, however, require a chastened ambition, a practiced humility, and trusting God to guide and guard one's steps. This is a core principle in the movement of churches becoming missional as they begin to ask what God wants to accomplish in and through them in their own context. Churches situating themselves as outposts of God's mission in their particular community will welcome, as Craig Van Gelder writes, that "all forms of ministry are going to bear the patterns and shape of the culture in which a congregation is ministering."⁷⁰ It is this "public living"—the ordinary forms of life where people are engaged—that is the critical venue where renewed habits and practiced gestures bear fruit for the sake of the in-breaking new creation.⁷¹

Lay Leadership for Communities of Mission

Thus far in this chapter, the focus has been on the leadership of the church's work to equip the saints for the work of service for the building up of the body in their primary avenue of service in and for the world. While habits and practices are the means of action that form believers for their public life as disciples of Jesus, there are four particular habits that tell a different story prime such a people for renewed action. Third, there is

⁷⁰ Craig Van Gelder, "How Missiology Can Help Inform the Conversation about the Missional Church in Context," *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Churches Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 41.

⁷¹ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 169.

both biblical and theological warrant for understanding our created and cultured world through various spheres and domains for individual and communal action. But that brings the argument back around to how a church might organize its membership (in training and equipping) for scattered action as witness in the world. The vital element here is teaching, training, and equipping by the church's leadership that drives the formation for cultural renewal via individuals and micro-communities.

The equipping and training of the gathered church for its ministry in scattered life cannot be done by forms of worship, discipleship, and fellowship that bear little to no connection to contemporary cultural life. When Guder argues for local churches to dedicate time and provide space for helping members discern the unique contours of shared mission, he writes that “structures of membership need to be transformed into disciplines of sending.”⁷² A church must shift away from its questionable priority of primarily meeting the felt needs of its members and become serious about equipping for service. Guder paints the picture this way: a church which sees itself “primarily as the Spirit's steward of the calling and gifts of its members ... would spend much less time on providing activities that take its members out of the world [and] devote more of its times of gathering for the equipping, support, and accountability of its member-missionaries.”⁷³

A church should both grasp the complete vision of its work and know how and when to differentiate between its organized and organic forms. Keller's articulation in *Center Church* of the four fronts of ministry (connecting people to God, to one another, to the city, and to the culture) helpfully marks out the first two as the primary work of the

⁷² Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 178.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 179.

church's leadership (for church as organization). The next two are the main work of lay leaders and are best expressed through in the church (as organism) living in the wider world. Specifically, connecting to culture ("through the integration of faith and work" and the wider cultural activities of ordinary life) is the privilege and ministry of every single member of the body.⁷⁴ A church must grapple with a means of discipleship and equipping that clarifies, clears, and sends: it clarifies a vision of faithfully incarnating Jesus' love in ordinary life, it clears space (time and schedule) by limiting regular church programming, and it sends members as commissioned servants into the world.

There is a real danger of leaving individual Christians without training to discern a world they find increasingly dizzying and secularized. The church has an obligation to train and disciple members—individually and in group settings (maybe around common occupations or spheres of cultural activity)—to discern God's gifts and calling for their commission as his witnesses in the places he has them. Here, a church may act like a "lay-seminary in discipleship and training" and "find ways to strongly support the people in their ministry 'outside the walls' of the church."⁷⁵ The particular roles of the teaching and ruling elders (in our tradition) are best utilized here in crafting a course of discipleship and cultivating other lay leaders who can share the responsibility of formation and sending.

For that purpose, this project commits to developing leadership for a ministry of cultural renewal. If the ordained leadership of the church (here, teaching and ruling elders) bear the primary responsibility for the discipling and equipping of the body, but

⁷⁴ Keller, *Center Church*, 293.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

the body itself must assume leadership for the ministries of cultural renewal, it makes sense that the on-the-ground leaders for such a ministry would come from the ordinary membership of the church engaged in the life of the world. These men and women become genuine leaders of others, either assisting in the equipping of other people in the church or outright leading others in the world for the common good in a particular domain or channel of culture. One could imagine an author and script-writer might grow in discipleship and vocation, coming alongside a few actors or parent volunteers in community theater to host workshops for aspiring students.

In Woodward's plan, members like this are gifted in specific ways that are to be discovered, developed, and designated for equipping others. They become leaders for the small to mid-sized discipleship (or *missional*) communities who help establish their rhythms and set their annual vision and focus. These communities are the basic unit of the church, existing between being gathered for public worship and being scattered to minister in communal or personal missional spaces.⁷⁶ Woodward suggests that there are five specific rhythms (corresponding to the five "giftings" he identifies in Ephesians 4) necessary for a particular missional community to make up its ethos for training, equipping, and sending in ministry.⁷⁷

In the ministry focus of this project, the communities of mission to be described will have a more limited scale. They are not meant to be holistic groups that carry the entire ethos and content of the church's discipling ministry, but rather they exist as

⁷⁶ Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 173.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 172-175, 199-202.

focused efforts at community and action for cultural renewal. Therefore, they first need those with apostolic or leadership gifts (Woodward's "dream-awakeners") who orient, train, and equip people to live out their calling as disciples in the kingdom of God.⁷⁸ They also need people gifted as evangelists (Woodward's "story tellers") who "equip the church to *proclaim the gospel by being witnesses*" and "help the congregation to be *redemptive agents*" who begin to see their everyday work as God-given vocation.⁷⁹ Putting these gifts together creates a strong ethos of discipleship to Christ in his kingdom that equips people for mission: being, saying, and doing witness to Jesus within every sphere of their ordinary life (home, neighborhood, work, and world). This kind of teamwork encourages and fosters an ethos that values relationships and actions within a specific domain or channel of culture.

One challenge this ministry focus presents is that of calling for and identifying women and men who are interested in undergoing a time of discipleship and equipping for taking up leadership in cultural renewal. Following an invitation to participate, they begin a period of instruction and training over eight to ten weeks that teaches the gestures and practices that shape the substance of renewed cultural action. This portion seeks to renew hearts by renewing habits. Next, those leaders begin to invite others into mission within a particular cultural domain for the purpose of collectively acting for the common good. This is the fruit of the reflection on revising the structures for sending.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁷⁹ Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 143.

PART THREE
MINISTRY PRACTICE

CHAPTER 5:

DISCIPLESHIP FOR PRACTICE: MINISTRY STRATEGY AND GOALS

This chapter describes the shape of the planned ministry project. This project seeks to design and implement a discipleship strategy of short-term training and longer term communities of mission for leadership in cultural renewal among the students and parents of Signal Pres in order to equip and empower them as the faithful presence of Jesus' love in a specific sphere of ordinary life. Our leadership seeks to proactively share the mission and avoid unintentionally assuming it will happen or leaving it to parachurch actors. The goal is to intentionally disciple and equip the ordinary members of the body for their ministry and service in the wider world and commission them to lead it well. This project takes into consideration both how God has made this world and how God is renewing and remaking it in Jesus Christ by his Spirit.

There is one specific aim in this initiative and three strategic means for accomplishing it. The overall aim falls under our church's vision to equip and empower our Signal Pres community for the "end" of mission as the faithful presence of Jesus' love in their ordinary lives. The desire to equip for leadership in cultural renewal means ministry must involve a purpose, people, and place. The purpose is to work with leaders (both known and unknown) to achieve a tangible change in the lives of the Pioneer Team

(defined below). This change will be indicated by how they pursue ordinary life with renewed intention through story and posture, practice and gestures. The people are men and women of our church community—likely high school students or parents—who show an interest in the aims of the project and a desire for experiment in ministry. The place is the cultural and communal life of our world in the particular, local space they inhabit as members of this church and the Signal Mountain and Chattanooga communities. This is where they live, interact, and work with others for witness in a specific sphere or domain of cultural life.

Specific Goals

There are three specific phases that comprise the project's strategy: to prepare a "Core Leadership Team" for shared planning and training, to invite and equip a "Pioneer Team" through a discipleship course, and to commission the Pioneer Team to form multiple communities of mission that involve others in communal action and witness in selected domains of cultural life. Each of these phases breaks down further into specific goals that are the concrete objectives of this ministry project (see fig. 1). First, it is necessary to choose and prepare the Core Team as the first goal of the ministry strategy. Following the guidance from Keller's *Center Church* on the fourth front of ministry leadership (cultural renewal) and Woodward's call to the Church to recover polycentric leadership in mission, this ministry project is shared with a leadership team.¹ Woodward describes a need for "impartational" leadership that functions as cultural architects and

¹ Keller, *Center Church*, 294, 330. Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 60-61.

guardians of environments—ones who can cultivate and collaborate through teaching, example, and relational mentoring.² My interpretation of this is a team of up to four others who, along with myself, would be responsible for three particular areas of ministry: the planning, design, leadership, and assessment of the discipleship course, oversight for and leadership in a community on mission, and the review, evaluation, and

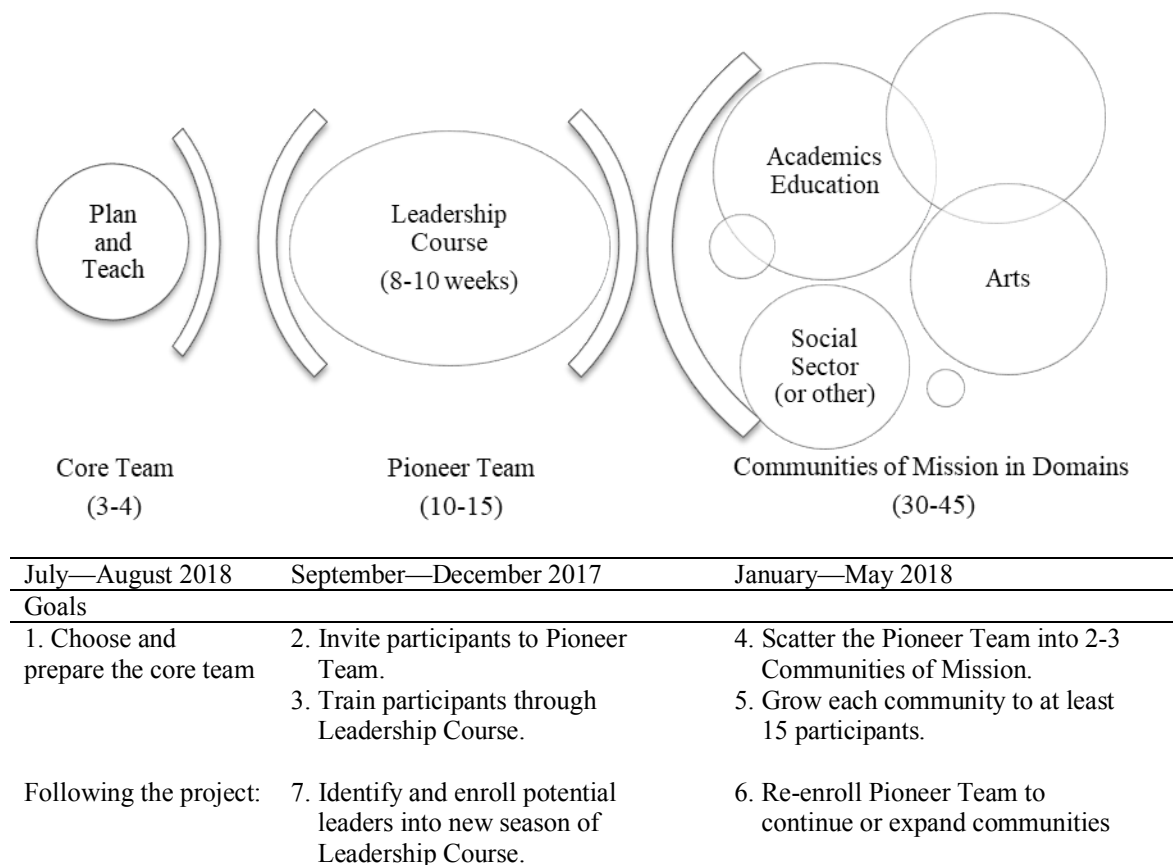


Figure 1. Phases and goals of the ministry project assessment of this project at Signal Pres.

The second phase of the ministry strategy comes in holding a discipleship course for initial participants willing to be part of a Pioneer Team. This course is the second goal

² Woodward, *Creating A Missional Culture*, 67-68.

of the project and involves inviting and training ten to fifteen participants as the Pioneer Team for leading in cultural renewal. This effort targets parents and high school students within the church family to engage the primary domain of family life (often the core of our membership and participation at Signal Pres related to our community and context) and its connections to various cultural spheres. The Core Team will make both public and personal invitations within the active Signal Pres community to those we think might be interested in joining us for this project.³ We hope for a minimum of ten participants and believe we can handle up to fifteen. Both the Core Team and the Pioneer Team are to participate only on the condition they are willing to give consent to be human subjects governed by the terms specified in their respective Consent Letters.⁴

The substance and duration of this course become the means to the third goal of the ministry project. Our objective is for Pioneer Team participants to gain a four-part framework for viewing and living in the world of creation and culture, practice spiritual disciplines, and then cultivate group leadership skills by applying their training within a particular domain of cultural life. Participating in and completing this discipleship course concludes the second significant phase of the ministry project.

After the discipleship course concludes, the third and final phase of the project begins. Pioneer Team members will be commissioned over the winter break to create specific communities of mission and invite others to join. This is the fourth goal of the ministry project: to scatter the Pioneer Team to establish at least two networked “communities of mission.” The initial assumption is that communities will likely develop

³ In this chapter, “we” or “our” refers to the Core Team, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Subject to Federal and Fuller Seminary Policy on “Human Subjects Research.”

in the domains of arts, athletics, academics, workplace, or community development. But the precise choices of domains will depend on the relational and physical locations of the Pioneer Team's cultural interests. The communities are conceived of as an attempt to test the leadership and formation of the Pioneer Team and expand their influence within the life of the church for the sake of the wider community. The hope is that they will be an avenue for behavioral change where Pioneer Team members draw on personal learning, habits, and a reorientation toward a particular cultural domain to lead others to enact "faithful presence within" that domain of life through the appropriate gestures.

Depending on the number of members available, the Pioneer Team aims to form either two or three communities of mission. This is the fifth goal of this ministry project and completes the third phase of the ministry project. Here, we hope to see an effort to grow to at least fifteen active participants in each community who meet monthly and engage in one creative, community-oriented service action within that domain. These groups will be open to new participants from Signal Pres and the wider community. New participants will not be "Human Subjects" for research, but will be provided a Disclosure Form as to the nature of the project. Following the conclusion of these groups, their assessment and evaluation, and reporting to our church's leadership, the Core Team will consider whether to pursue remaining potential goals. They are: sixth, to re-enroll willing Pioneer Team to continue or expand communities, and seventh, to identify and enroll new potential leaders into the Leadership Course.

Drafting the Content for the Leadership Course

The "Leadership Course" conceived by the Core Team is a nine-week course at Signal Pres that specifically fleshes out the substance of the Theological Reflection

(Chapters Three and Four of this project). We will design the class to take place over a series of Wednesday evenings beginning in September 2017 and ending in December of the same year. It is worth noting that Wednesday nights are part of our regular ministry strategy for training at Signal Pres. The course is structured in two key parts. First, it begins with four weeks devoted to “Retelling the Story” through a four-part framework for viewing the world. Those weeks provide the salvation-history schema of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation to help “re-story” the world we live in by attending to God’s structure for his world and the direction it takes. Each week of the teaching content introduces a corresponding spiritual discipline as a “renewed practice:” creation with celebration, fall with confession, redemption with repenting and re-believing, and new creation with deepening relationships.

The second half of the course is devoted to four weeks on “Recovering our Calling.” Pioneer Team participants will cycle again through the same four-part story of salvation history, but this time they will treat the story as a lens through which they discern the shape of faithful living. Content here intentionally moves from a “thinking” or “seeing” focus toward one of “living” and taking action. Each week touches briefly on the four movements of the story (potentially noting something missed the first time around or developing the insights further) and applies the story for the sake of renewal in the domains of creational and cultural life. Each week also takes a further step toward sketching the outline of the communities on mission and articulating the gestures and habits of faithful presence within the various domains of life. This second half of class capitalizes on the formation of the disciplines and links them with the gestures of faithful presence to further reveal their horizontal dimensions in community, not just their

vertical dimensions in one's individual relationship with God. To that end, we intend to develop two resources: a "Glossary" of key terms (short definitions of important words or concepts) for the sake of sharing a common language and a set of "Questions" to help with discernment in a particular cultural domain.

With respect to the resources necessary to lead the course, the initial needs are simple. Once permission is obtained from the Signal Pres session to add this effort to our current ministry structure and devote some of my personal time to its leadership, the next steps unfold quickly. We will secure an appropriate teaching space with easy access for the community and publicize the opportunity clearly (including the requirements for participating on the Pioneer team). The Core Team has the responsibility of dividing up the teaching of the Leadership Course, crafting the materials and handouts to keep the same design and flow of content, and accomplishing the objectives for each session. Each session closely follows a standard plan for sixty to seventy-five minutes: welcome participants and frame up the subject; read, reflect on, and discuss a critical scripture text; teach core concepts and practices; and conclude with prayer. We strive to privilege actual engagement with and reflection on scripture at the beginning of each class to stay rooted in the Biblical narrative and reserve time toward the end for adequate practice and clear assignments.

Commissioning for Communities

Following the conclusion of the eight-week teaching cycle of the Leadership Course, we intend to take one or two additional weeks for training and commissioning the Pioneer Team. This is an intentional transition for the Pioneer Team as they navigate the shift from a community of learning to a community of practice, leading others in

learning and action. Since the goal of the communities is to function in a single cultural domain, it is important to find a consistent way to name and describe them. We choose to borrow from several sources, but rely most on Bob Roberts' language on cultural domains—created structures or spheres that make up the social, cultural, and knowledge infrastructure.⁵ Such domains (or “channels”) do not precisely follow a more classic discussion of the various creational “spheres” that make up human culture, but they became a useful way for us to consider focusing on the domains that we can identify in late-modern western culture.⁶ With some adaptation for our specific context and shape of church ministry and local community, we settled on the following ten domains: family, government, education, arts (and entertainment), business and economics, media and tech, social sector (non-profit and service), health and medicine, environment (land, air, water, creation), and neighborhood and networks (friendship).

In *Creating a Missional Culture*, Woodward attends to the reality that language and artifacts are two key elements of creating a “cultural web.”⁷ In addition to the glossary and questions, we commit to creating a “Map” and “Session Guide” to codify language and be artifacts that can help create some of the culture we desire to see lived out among the communities of mission. The Map serves to paint a picture of the mission,

⁵ As Roberts writes, “[T]he church connects to society through the natural infrastructures, equipping and sending people through their jobs to affect a particular domain.” He acknowledges divergent number of domains depending on the scholarly source. Bob Roberts Jr., *Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Engage a Flat World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 40–41, Kindle. See also Gabe Lyons' language in identifying seven different “channels of culture.” Gabe Lyons, “Influencing Culture: An Opportunity For the Church,” accessed December 7, 2019, <http://208.106.253.109/essays/influencing-culture.aspx?page=3>.

⁶ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 67–72.

⁷ Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 36.

communities, domains, and tasks necessary for forming a community on mission. The Session Guide is the simple outline that each community can take and use as a template for discussion and action within their specific domain. Together, the Glossary, Questions, Map, and Guide will be helpful tools for shaping the communities of mission and leading participants to think, see, love and live differently as the faithful presence of Jesus' love within a cultural domain.

Communities of Mission

The final phase of this ministry project is to develop multiple communities of mission that can be vehicles of communal action for witness. The Core Team has the responsibility of working with the Pioneer Team members to discern: first, whether each will continue (as intended) into the next phase; and second, which domains the Pioneer Team is best suited to move into for action. Since the goal for leading the communities is shared leadership (like that of the Core Team), we hope to help the Pioneer Team arrive at two or three domains that all (or at least most) team members are connected to and excited about serving within. In the design phase of the ministry project, this is a mystery waiting to be revealed based on the participants who commit. One key to their interest will be the Core Team's ability to carefully illustrate from the variety of domains in our world during the eight weeks of the class. Each member of Core Team will be commissioned to serve as a "coach" for one Pioneer Team as they collaborate and lead this effort.

Following those decision points, the next step is to call for new participants from the centered on establishing networks of people who overlap in interest, we do not want to limit participation to only people within Signal Pres' membership or attendance. We

intend to make public invitations via verbal and published announcements and posts as well as ask the Pioneer Team to make personal invitations. This is an explicit attempt to engage the leadership of the Pioneer Team on the front end of cultural renewal in practicing witness. It provides them with the opportunity to identify friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc. who are already engaged in a specific domain of life and then invite them to come together for the common good. These communities of mission are ideally sized at just under twelve participants but could potentially grow into groups of fifteen people.⁸ We want to remember Andy Crouch's wisdom that: "the right scale for human flourishing is small and specific."⁹

Each community will then be given two avenues of effort in becoming hubs of invitation and witness to others as they act for the flourishing of life in a particular domain. First, they are to establish a rhythm of coming together to reflect on their actual living and engage with that domain of life around the questions put together in the Session Guide. Ideally, this will take no more than four or five gatherings and will reflect the habits, gestures, and questions the Pioneer Team gained during their Leadership Course. Each session will revolve around a fundamental question that provides a key focus and helps spark and drive discussion.¹⁰ Second, they are to collaborate on some creative, community-oriented action that will serve the cultural work in that specific

⁸ Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 176-177. He allows them to be larger (between fifteen and fifty) as full-blown discipleship communities. Given the high nature of discussion and collaborative action, we chose to set a lower target to begin with.

⁹ Andy Crouch, "What's So Great About 'The Common Good?'" *Christianity Today*, (October 2012), accessed November 1, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/november/whats-so-great-about-common-good.html>.

¹⁰ Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 35. The four fundamental questions for these sessions were adapted and expanded from Walsh and Middleton's basic worldview questions.

domain. This intentional action comes as the fruit of their reflection on their domain of culture and is an effort to be engaged for the good of their neighbors and the glory of God. For the sake of clarity, we conceive of this “action” as a one-time step or event rather than an ongoing effort. We expect that it will be something that stems from their reflection and completes the assignment for the community of mission. Our biggest hope as a Core team is that their action will enact a “parable of the kingdom” that bears witness to the in-breaking new creation in Jesus by his Spirit.

In conclusion, the ministry project as conceived is a constructive proposal for teaching, equipping, and sharing leadership in a church-based structure that enables gathering, forming, and sending for witness. It flows from a recognition of our particular cultural moment both in the church and in the community where the lack of Christian discipleship for life in the wider world is being revealed. The church is revisiting its mission, renegotiating its shape, recovering the central importance its story, and looking for wise lay leaders for this mission. The generous hope is that through the three phases of this project, participants will rediscover the story, calling, practices, and structures of being the faithful presence of Jesus’ love in every place in this world to which he calls them. This world is the setting of our very lives. As Al Wolters writes in what might be considered the rationale for this whole project: “if Christ is the reconciler of all things, and if we have been entrusted with ‘the ministry of reconciliation’ on his behalf, then we have a redemptive task where our vocation places us in his world.”¹¹

¹¹ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 73.

CHAPTER 6:

FORWARD: IMPLEMENTATION, ASSESSMENT, AND EVALUATION

Any effort to implement a strategy, project, or plan is necessarily an encounter between theory and practice, and this ministry project of equipping leadership for cultural renewal was no exception. As Branson and Martinez note, “implemental leadership” attends to the activities, structures, fruit, and consequences of actual ministry on the ground in a fashion that aids the overall effort of the “action-reflection cycle.”¹ Implementation is not complete without assessment and recommendations for the future. For us at Signal Pres, we experienced a mix of things going clearly according to plan and some that went in completely different directions.

Timeline and Implementation of the Goals

Work on this ministry project began in the summer of 2017 by seeking and receiving approval for it at the June stated meeting of the Signal Pres session. At that meeting, I shared an outline and a visual sketch (similar to fig. 1) of the planned project and received the endorsement of the leaders to go forward. The first ministry goal was to create a four-person Core Leadership Team. By the end of that summer I had received

¹ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 57.

firm “yes” commitments from two others, both ruling elders at our church. Including myself, that left us one short of the goal, but we felt confident in proceeding.²

By September, we had settled on a plan of offering the Leadership Course we were designing alongside the Wednesday night programming structure at our church. Of the three reasons for this, the first was that we were beginning a whole renewal of that ministry—new timeline, hours, and structure—in September 2017. The Leadership Course seemed to be a great asset at a moment when the widest pool of people might be interested and available. It had the additional benefit of being at an accessible time and place for parents (childcare was available) and for high school students who, in our community, are often tied up every other weeknight. As a matter of practical importance, it also fit the schedule of the Core Team.

We set about the second ministry goal of identifying, inviting, and beginning with ten to fifteen participants who would make up the Pioneer Team. We made both public and personal calls and invitations, receiving a few initial commitments and much interest in attending for the introduction. We prepared classroom 303 at church with extra chairs and had additional Consent Forms for the Pioneer Team on hand. That introductory session on September 13, 2017, took the entire time just to explain the course, address the many questions, and call for commitment. People trickled in throughout the hour allotted, and by the end we had twenty-six potential participants, nineteen of whom completed the consent form and committed to return.

The Pioneer Team began with those committed, and fifteen of them (not including

² For the remainder of this chapter, “we” refers to the perspective of the Core Leader Team unless otherwise noted.

the three Core Team) stayed through the duration of the Leadership Course for a 100 percent completion of the third ministry goal. Three additional ones even showed up unexpectedly after the first session, signed up, and stayed out of curiosity for the class. As planned for the goal, we taught through eight weeks of the content (twice through the cycle of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation). Because the initial week ended up being orientation, we added one week to the original schedule at the end to preserve eight full weeks for the cycle. The only early challenge was the teaching mix. The goal had been for myself to teach four times (twice through two of the acts in the story) and each of the Core Team to teach twice on one act each, but one of our Core Team had an unexpected family crisis right about the time we began. He kept participating with limited leadership, but I took his preparation and teaching sessions.

We expected the transition between the Leadership Course and the Communities of Mission to be the critical moment, and that proved true. After we did some polling both in the class and also by means of a Google form survey after the fifth class, the top five domains by level of personal engagement or significant interest (participants could pick three) were the following: neighborhood (and friend networks)—eight, family—seven, environment—five, education—five, arts—three. After discussion, the whole team chose neighbors (and friends), family, and arts as the three domains to pursue going forward. (Many of the “environment” votes felt more strongly about “arts.”) We added a ninth gathering during December as a special night to clearly delineate the Map for the Communities, the Session Guide, and the timeline. The ministry goal was to scatter the Pioneer Team to form at least two communities of mission, but we walked out of the room that night with potentially three communities and at least thirteen commitments

from the Pioneer Team – three for family, three for arts, and seven for neighborhoods.

The charge for communities was twofold: first, create the community through consistent application of the “deeper relationships” habit from the class, and second, carry out the mission of acting as the faithful presence of Jesus’ love in a particular domain.

The timeline called for promoting the opportunity for participation in the communities of mission over the holidays and through early January. Each community was to hold an initial gathering January 20—February 10, 2018. At this point, the ministry project fell apart. I will rely on the qualitative analysis and evaluation below to try to untangle the reasons, but three things were clearly in play as immediate developments. First, as the family challenges of one Core Team member continued and his other responsibilities increased, I released him from being part of the Core Team. That left me and one other to coach three groups. Second, I approached the “family” community (composed of retired grandparents) and simply asked them to carry on as they desired given our challenges and my inability to coach two groups. They chose to be thankful for the class and learnings but felt they did not have a solid vision to proceed forward without significant help. Third, the remaining two communities simply did not get off the ground. After much discussion, the neighborhood (and friendships) group decided that informal shepherding, presence, and one-to-one visits was their best avenue for action going forward and they did not need to gather for that kind of scattered ministry. That left my remaining Core Team member unsure how to proceed and encourage them. The “arts” community, which I worked with, had only one response to the invitation period for new participants (and she was nearly a member of the Leadership Course at the beginning before time commitments prevented it). They made a second

round of public invitations and gathered once to brainstorm next steps in March but had no response. Though the leadership team by then had a plan and purpose for gathering and action, none of the team felt able (in personal skills or in margin of time) to take initiative and lead from there. That group finally tried to reboot one more time in early June 2018, but summer travels and absences prevented future gatherings.

In summary, the communities of mission completely failed at the fifth goal of growing to at least fifteen participants in each community and committing to one creative service in each domain. That removed the sixth goal of re-enrolling the Pioneer Team to continue or expand the (non-existent) communities. It also caused us to pause because there was plenty of evaluating and learning to do before attempting the seventh goal: a new version of the course. The overall conclusion of the project was success in forming a Core Team and then equipping and discipling a Pioneer team, but failure in forming communities of mission for cultural renewal within particular domains.

Qualitative Assessment and Evaluation

The original ministry project proposal called for four specific assessments. The first was to be administered at the mid-point of the Leadership Course (via conversation and personal sharing) and the second would come at the end of the class on its content, leadership, and helpfulness (via an online survey). We did not officially complete the mid-point sharing primarily because the conversation was so robust at the end of the class that we did not get there in time. A quick read of the room felt that we were connecting and going strong and did not need to create future space over the fall break to converse, particularly when the break made communication difficult at best.

The second assessment through online survey was moved up from the end to after

the fifth class (part two of creation). After that class and the first clear statement of the shape of the communities of mission we would form at the end, it felt necessary to go ahead and take the temperature of participants on a few issues to help shape the remainder of the class content. It netted thirteen responses (of the fifteen present for that class) between October 26–November 2. Of the five specific questions, the first two asked about what has been most encouraging or enlightening and most confusing or unclear to participants up to that point.³ The third question asked whether participants leaned more pessimistic (1) or optimistic (5) about the “possibility for cultural change along Christian directions” on a scale of 1-5).⁴ The response average was 2.85, with several extremes. Fourth, we asked whether participants tended to see the current culture as more fundamentally fallen and flawed (1) or redeemable and good (5)—also on a scale of 1-5. The response average was 2.7. Finally, we asked team members to pick up to three different cultural domains (of ten options) that they personally had current engagement in or significant interest in.”⁵ The extremes of responses to question three and the votes on question five helped drive themes and illustrations from there on. Of the two remaining planned assessments, the third (an assessment of the communities on mission by the Pioneer team themselves) did not take place because the communities did not exist. The final planned assessment—an organizational assessment of the three communities by the Core Team—consisted of addressing four key questions for

³ The first two questions on personal views of participants will be engaged below under the evaluations of the Leadership Course.

⁴ The third and the fourth questions were designed to help us check the default “temperament” of the participants. The questions came from Keller, *Center Church*, 225.

⁵ These were the ten options discussed in chapter five.

evaluation. Our responses make up the most substantive assessment and evaluation of this project.

First, we investigated whether the Leadership course actually carried vision and content for discipleship for cultural renewal. We believe it did, and participants appreciated the extended time to reflect on Scripture and let it reveal and drive the discussion of cultural engagement. To our surprise, the four-part story of God's action in salvation history was a somewhat new framework to the class: most had not heard it, let alone seen through it any implications for the world of creation and human culture. The latter was much more difficult for the class: the argument that the entirety of the world and its cultural life matters to God seemed primarily to be instrumental for its function as an avenue for witness. By the second half of the Leadership Course, survey responses showed we were making progress. One wrote "it's encouraging to me that we are studying and thinking about how we should be engaging culture AND have the goal of actually doing something." Another appreciated "the emphasis on viewing all areas of your life as being influenced and affected by your faith and trust in God." Still another was encouraged by the reality that "our religion does not stand alone, but should be interwoven into every part of our lives."

But we consistently ran up against the reality that the "background understanding" of the people we were training had in fact been built up over time into habituated dispositions that ran cross-purpose to the story we were telling.⁶ We were painting a picture and telling a story via the classic four acts of salvation history with a

⁶ Smith, *Imagining*, 44-45.

missional aim, but encountered a default story blocking the way. While the “four-act story” made sense on the surface, the black/white, “two-act,” individual sin-and-salvation reductive story was the default register of the heart and mind. As Guder notes, the more complete story uncovered parts of our hearts and minds that need to be re-captured by the biblical story. Re-conversion to Christ needed to happen before we could undertake reorganization of the body.⁷ There was little category in many minds for new creation other than leaving this creation and going to “heaven.” That was consistently difficult to overcome and link back to mission here and now, because the beginning and default view for mission seemed to be sharing the gospel message as opposed to a wider restoration and renewal of creation.

Similarly, while the imperative of cultural renewal came through loud and clear, the personal responses of many in the class revealed a skepticism about its value because of a prior pessimism toward the wider culture as one aimed at corrupting of the young. We had a large share of this class come from the older generations (retirement age or older) who were very comfortable in a Christendom-mode mix of God, country, culture, and tradition. There was a temptation present to view “culture” as our “contemporary culture” and see it as a threat to defend against rather than a theatre for discerning God’s action. As one member confessed his struggles here, he also admitted that he appreciated the “emphasis on ‘Common Good’ as God’s work in the world and our responsibility to promote the common good in concert with everyone, every day.”

Second, we considered whether the Core and Pioneer Teams were thriving. The

⁷ Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 150.

Core Team functioned well in communication, relationship, focus, and work with the only challenge being the one Core Team member's evolving situation. As to the Pioneer Team as a whole, they expressed both gratitude for the course and content and a growing relationship with each other. The learning environment was focused, collaborative, engaging, and encouraging. We did have two struggles on composition and attendance here that sparked some learning for us. On composition, only ten of the twenty-six people interested (and six of the sixteen who participated) came from the target demographic—and none of them were students. That meant most of our participants were at least one step removed from age and the domains of cultural life (revolving around family and school) that we planned the course for. Some of that may stem from the choice to host the class alongside our regular programming structure. The presence of other options for adults, previous commitments to serve elsewhere, and the challenge for students (to opt in to this course and out of a program they loved or were used to) changed our course's composition.

The attendance challenge to the Pioneer team was difficulty in sustaining it through the course. Due to sickness, travel, or busyness, most completed only six or seven of the nine sessions. That is normal for our community and somewhat expected, but it presented a big challenge when developing a cyclic and progressive theme. The level of busyness and prior commitment presented a further challenge when trying to imagine gathering for the communities on mission. We did not calendar out those events or mandate times because we wanted the Pioneer Team themselves to create and organize them. That proved to be significantly challenging for them. For the arts community I worked with, it was nearly impossible to find a monthly time February—May when all

were free. In a close-knit community like ours where people have a great number of connection points and commitments, calling for and creating space for training will continue to be an obstacle we face.

Third, we asked whether the communities on mission were taking root in gathering and scattering for imaginative cultural renewal. They were not. When we considered factors why, two factors emerged. First, while we tried for a blend of organized leadership and organic action, we perhaps did not create enough space and time to attend to each one. We pressed for some measure of organized gathering for the sake of communal action in a domain, but that may have been too much to ask for following too short of a time given toward preparing and equipping leadership for it. My fear was that without organized action, the project would devolve into individuals trying to see and live differently without mutual support. But it seems pressing for such action seemed to leave us without any at all. Second, there was a difficulty present in the Leadership Course and throughout the transition to communities of simply imagining something new. One of the constant questions we heard was variation on the theme of “now what are these supposed to be doing? What does that action look like?” It was a plea for better stories and more illustrations of the kind of cultural activity we were addressing, but we had difficulty here because we were trying to create something new rather than replicate something elsewhere. Despite our best efforts at illustration during teaching, we fell short here.

Fourth and finally, with the virtue of reflection and hindsight, we evaluated what was good, bad, confusing, or needed change. Much for the good and bad have been enumerated already, but the confusion was revelatory. The biggest source came once we

shifted to “communities of mission” and revolved around “who” leads “what.” Defining the “what” was simpler according to the aim of the Course, Map, Session Guide we produced, but teams were unclear on who owned which part and what they personally needed to do. I think I assumed wrongly that it would be somewhat obvious and people would take personal initiative in accomplishing it. If so, I too-easily read my own personality makeup and bias for action onto what group leaders can and should do. I did not give enough attention to the question of whether the Pioneer Team members present had the gifts to do that or felt the safety, freedom, or confidence to move forward.

In conclusion, the two key phases of the ministry project had entirely different outcomes. We had great success with finding Pioneer Team member willing to sign on for a longer course and engage the material in a manner of discovery, teaching, and practice. This squares with an appetite in our church community for teaching from God’s word and easy willingness to be part of a course together. The second phase—forming communities of mission for action in cultural renewal—was an almost complete failure of vision and practice. The final assessment seems to reveal a double failure. The first was a failure in actual formation: though we clearly taught the story and outlined the habits and practices, we did not give them the space, duration, or depth needed to produce real change or transformation. Second, there was a failure in mission as we did not succeed in forming communities who would take action for witness in specific domain of cultural life. Consequently, we as a church did not move forward in a new ministry initiative that prioritized being and doing witness among our neighbors in the domains of ordinary life. As a Pioneer Team, our faithful presence was to God to one another, but fell short of incarnating that among our neighbors through our tasks and in our spheres of influences.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The expectation of this project was not to “ship” a perfect plan from inception, but that the Core Team would collaborate, grow in skill in teaching, and learn wise practices for leadership throughout a year-long strategy. The project itself was an experiment in designing and implementing a strategy of short-term training and longer-term communities of mission for cultural renewal among the people of Signal Pres. The goal was to equip and empower them to be the faithful presence of Jesus’ love in the various spheres of ordinary life. It sought to build on the history of Signal Pres’ heart for its community and a membership embedded within the wider area while equipping a new generation for mission amid the challenges of a changing cultural landscape.

The specific ministry strategy relied upon three phases. First, we established a core team to develop, teach, and lead the project. Second, that Core Team invited participants (a “Pioneer Team”) to a Leadership Course for training in discipleship. That course was focused around retelling the story of salvation history, recovering a posture of voluntary exile, renewing the habits and practices, and revisioning the structures of sending membership in ministry. The third phase began following the conclusion of the discipleship course, with members of the Pioneer Team scattering to form the leaders of a few communities of mission for the next several months. Those communities were

designed to be hubs of gathering people within a specific cultural domain and encouraging action as the faithful presence of Jesus' love within that sphere.

Adaptation for the future

This project seeks to revisit the discussion of praxis and work around the circle again for an every-cycling learning spiral. Our attempt at discipling and equipping leadership for communities of cultural renewal was but the first iteration of an idea conceived, designed, created and then implemented. The further work here is to assess and evaluate with an eye toward future practice. Doing so does not assume that experience itself is the teacher, but that intentional theological reflection is the key for making further progress.¹ The following thoughts represent an initial set of lessons learned and offer a few key recommendations for how it might be adapted and improved for a second round of ministry at Signal Pres.

First, the most significant adaptation stems from the lesson that we compressed the course into an unrealistic time frame. I think we succumbed to the modern temptation that we can distill something to its essence and then replicate and scale it at will. Eight weeks was too short a frame to teach a story and incorporate new practices with any staying power. The reality of the kind of “conversion” Smith describes in his work that can truly “sanctify perception” requires time.² If ritual and repetition matter, then we must attend to the forms that do the forming. A course like this can perhaps function as a spark or tinder that kindles a flame, but the norms of habit and practice become the logs

¹ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 42.

² Smith, *Imagining*, 51, 62, 151-155.

that fuel the fire of daily living. Though specific practices we incorporated and weekly habit we encouraged were too little, too new, and ultimately too thin to have any formational “staying power” against the lived habituation of decades of practice. That meant we were just working at changing minds and hearts with argument and story and therefore part of the failed attempts at cultural change Hunter rightly critiques. Mind and hearts revealed faces that said “we’re with you,” but bodily action said “not really: we’re confused.”

This underscores what Smith drives home: since the “affective, emotional ‘background’ is also part of the dispositions or tendencies” that we bring to our all our contexts, “educating for *Christian* action” will require attending to story more than principles.³ Despite the fact that we gave prime time to the story and habits, we did not get down to the affective register of hearts in the time allotted to genuinely form a re(new)ed vision for action. We should extend the “story” (story and habits) and “calling” (posture and practice) portions of the course each to six weeks at minimum. We must be more diligent in illustrating the story and practicing the habits that really work to form our perception for a broader, deeper picture of story-driven mission as the body of Christ in the world.⁴

Second, the confusion over “who” leads “what” in communities pointed us to the conclusion that perhaps it was a mistake to pair the “discipleship training” piece and the “leading a community” piece together as we did. The second required some relational

³ Smith, *Imagining*, 36-38.

⁴ Ibid., 154.

ability and developed giftings that the first neither sufficiently called for, identified, nor addressed. In the future it may be wiser to still attend to the equipping that needs to take place, but pair it more intentionally with an examination gifts, abilities, passions and the practices that help shape the ministry into which God is leading a person or people.

Polycentric leadership of others in a community cannot be simply named; it must be as carefully cultivated as any story or set of practices. If we do this again in the future, I would add a third six-week module on “community” to attend to the shape and practice of *leading* for communities on mission.⁵ That would relieve pressure and provide space in the content of the second module (“calling”) for shining a brighter light on position and posture for actual cultural engagement—not just ethics, evangelism, or excellence. This third module could be then the venue for taking personal action and reflecting on the habits of cultural renewal so that participants have a better vision and means for moving forward. Perhaps it might include visiting an existing community on mission or practicing the leadership of one.

Alternatively, we could consider the possibility of not actually linking the “organized action” emphasis to the equipping portion at all. If leadership on this fourth ministry front of cultural renewal must come from the people of the church themselves, it may be necessary to release the determinations of the shape of that action to those most involved in it. In this course we tried to provide a map and guide to help with initial steps, but that was not nearly as helpful as intended. It may be best to advocate for something

⁵ Woodward’s *Creating a Missional Culture* deserves to be taken quite seriously on this very point. 171-213.

like “vocation-specific groups” with freedom around their particular structure and focus in various cultural domains.⁶ The discipleship course then releases people into the world (and hopefully connects to those groups) with freedom to lead or participate as they will, rather than require it take a certain form. That also allows those who are most entrepreneurial to emerge as leaders in that domain. They can then seek others to come around them with a variety of gifts to help create networks and norms for gathering or for action.

To that end, a third adaptation for the future might be in how the whole project begins. If the Core Team is to help coach the communities, one Core Team participant proposed that the very beginning be an attempt to “practice” what we are about to “preach.” Perhaps the project begins with site visits or field trips to locations of cultural activity in a particular domain, observing or interviewing a Christian living ordinary life with renewed intention as the faithful presence of Jesus love. Perhaps a visual Map and Guide should be given at the outset to keep eyes on the “end” of the project. We reflected on the reality that the Core Team was conceived of as coaches for the communities on mission, but what the communities really needed was leadership that was both player *and* coach. Each community needed someone (or a few) who were regularly, deeply engaged in that domain of life but also willing and able to recruit and coach others in the same area. It may not be fair to ask this to spontaneously emerge from Course participants; it may instead be better to pair nascent communities of mission with experienced leaders. That would ensure the beauty of personal example and passionate investment. Most of

⁶ Keller and Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor*, 259.

the Pioneer team participants were excited about the Leadership Course and willing to continue in community, but ill-equipped (or perhaps the wrong fit entirely) to be able to lead others in an area. They were excited to belong to one another as members of a church taking a course to gather or take direction from leaders, but less thrilled at the prospect of transformational church and moving out to engage others in shared mission.

Implications for the Church

Perhaps the most significant lesson from the failure of this ministry project is a reinforcement of something both Keller and Guder identify: it is the power of God in the gospel, told via the biblical story, that captures hearts and sends bodies into the world in renewed commission. Keller is emphatic that gospel renewal is the key to a renewed mission by a church. The signs of such renewal—nominal believers being converted, people experiencing a humbling and loving that softens hearts to others, outsiders being attracted to the faith, renewed orientation in cultural life and work—are all downstream effects of renewed hearts.⁷ Similarly, Guder states that what every church needs most of all is conversion: a crisis of coming again and again to Jesus Christ and being sent as his witness.⁸ Every gospel invitation is a commission. Every ministry of cultural renewal lives downstream of a gospel renewal “headwater” that reorients people to God and sends the Church into voluntary exile in the posture of faithful presence of Jesus’ own love. While we might pray for and prepare for such gospel renewal, we do not produce it by any ministry project.

⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, 79-82.

⁸ Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 150-153.

Despite the failures of this project, there is great promise both within our church and community for encouraging and developing ministries of cultural renewal. Advocating for these wider domains of life as spheres of God's glory displayed in creation and culture provides both the venue for vibrant expression of our faith and the *via* (the way) that presses us outward in witness as faithful presence. The call of the church here is not to dictate the shape of that cultural development, but to make clear the call to renewed participation in the structures of creation and culture along the direction of the cross' vertical and horizontal beams.⁹ The prayerful aim is to unleash space, imagination, and habits for good things to grow, grace to abound, and God to be praised.

⁹ Smith, *Desiring*, 209-211.

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